

INFERNO!



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Tales of Fantasy & Adventure

INFERNO!

ONE OF THE most common questions we get asked here at Black Library Towers is 'How do I write for Inferno!?' It's not a question that can be answered as easily as you think. After all, there are many factors that we have to consider before a story is deemed worthy to see in print in this fine publication. Does the plot hold together? Does the story 'fit' with the Warhammer or Warhammer 40,000 universe? Are the characters interesting and well defined? Will a reader want to turn the page and find out what happens next? And many other factors too long to list here.

To make the life of any potential Inferno! author that little bit easier, we've spent the past few months compiling an updated and revised set of contributor guidelines. It is our goal to make our contributor guides as accessible and straightforward as possible, that way we can snare all you talented people out there for our magazine. We have an open submission policy, meaning we accept story ideas from anybody, but there are certain guidelines we like people to

follow to make our hard-working editors' lives that little bit easier.

Now there's no guarantee that following these guidelines will ensure that your story sees print – there is, of course, the nebulous factor of talent to be taken into consideration – but, if you take these guides to heart, then your story will stand every chance of making the Inferno! grade.

We're not content to rest there, however. A discussion has already taken place where the idea was mooted that in future we set up a facility whereby Inferno! submissions are accepted online. The tech priests were last seen muttering their prayers to the Machine God, so watch this space.

OF COURSE, beyond Inferno! we have the Black Library's range of Warhammer and Warhammer 40,000 novels. Over the past few years many of your favourite authors and characters have made the jump from short stories to longer tales, and we love it when that happens! It makes us feel all warm inside!

Sandy Mitchell and his carousing commissar, Ciaphas Cain, did so very recently. Ben Counter has been a regular contributor to Inferno! since its inception but now has four novels under his belt including his incredibly popular series based around the Soul Drinkers chapter of Space Marines. Even the mighty Dan Abnett's Gaunt's Ghosts series began life as Inferno! short stories.

Inferno! is a great way to showcase new talent, and it also gives our more established writers a chance to stretch their writing legs and pen a short story. Take your cues from those we publish and find out what it is we want from our contributors.

Who knows? Follow the new Inferno! contributor guides and you never know, you might be the next Sandy Mitchell, Ben Counter or Dan Abnett!



Christian Dunn
Editor

• ENTER THE INFERNO! •

Write to us

Inferno! • BL Publishing • Games Workshop Ltd • Willow Road • Lenton • Nottingham NG7 2WS • UK

Email us

publishing@games-workshop.co.uk

Online

<http://www.blacklibrary.com> (including online ordering)

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PUBLICATION

PUBLISHER

Marc Gascoigne

EDITOR

Christian Dunn

ASSISTANT EDITOR

Matt Ralphs

PRODUCTION

Andy Walsh

WRITERS

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Jonathan Green

Nick Kyme

James Peaty

Stu Taylor

ARTISTS

Tom Carney

David Millgate

John Wigley

Adrian Smith

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Nozomi Goto

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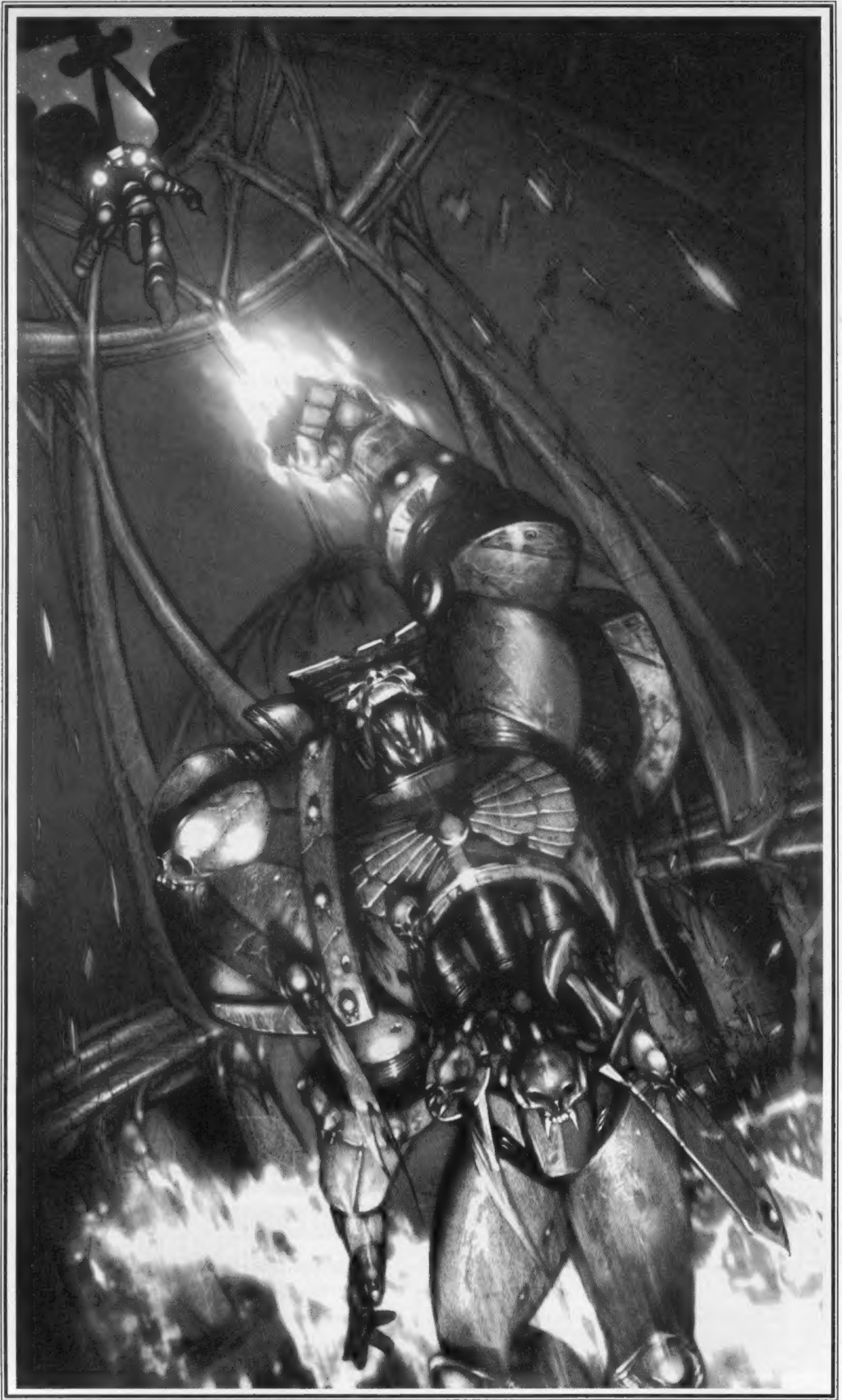
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BLOOD of ANGELS

By C S Goto

*'Would you really want to meet an angel?
With the tip of one wing in heaven and the other
dripping with blood, could there be any
soul more tortured?'*

**Angels Sanguine Chaplain, addressing
aspirant Baalite warriors.**

THE BURNERS ROARED, ripping the heavily shadowed air into strips of flame. Vast stone pillars reached up towards the rapidly descending figure, twisting into arches that aspired to the heavens. The jump pack threw fire into the yawning dark of the temple, propelling Tenjin down from the ugly crater he had punched through the gargoyle-infested roof. At his back, chasing his diagonal path down through the echoing hollows of the inner sanctum, a shaft of moonlight pierced the shrouded gloom like a javelin stuck in his back. As Tenjin turned, gyroscoping throughout his spotlight descent, searching for his target, the moonlight glinted off the blood-red that covered the right-hand side of his armour. He seemed to pulse with life.

The sanctum reverberated with the gaseous thunder of the jump pack, obliterating the awful silence that fled from its sanctimonious haven. Tenjin could hear nothing but the roar of flames and power. Blood throbbed in his brain, pounding out a pattern in his ears, sending a thrill through his body like the drums of war. His rapid drop from the ornate ceiling had pushed him through greater negative G-forces than a normal man could have withstood, but his augmented body registered only a slight red tinge in his vision as some capillaries burst.

In the gloom that engulfed him, Tenjin could see almost nothing. His bloody eyes scanned the darkness for any sign of movement. The flames from his jump pack sent the shadows dancing into frenzies, projecting grotesque and unnatural images against the distant walls and pillars. His eyes flickered and darted, struggling to separate the random flood of movement from the silhouette of his enemy, knowing all the time

that Ansatsu could see him clearly, falling out of the night sky like a burning meteor.

There. A flash of red. Deep red lost in the darkness. Darting from pillar to pillar. Gone again.

Tenjin slowed his descent, provoking a powerful roar of resistance from the jets of his jump pack as they struggled to balance his gigantic form. He was hovering now, twenty metres from the ground. Fire spilled out from the base of his pack, incinerating a ceremonial banner, which fell in burning tatters from its tethers strung between two great pillars beneath him. Fragments of burning textile fluttered to the ground, shedding moments of light across the stone floor, rendering the temple into fractions of daylight.

There. Behind the pillar on the left. The red flashed back into hiding, but it was too late. Tenjin leaned forward over the barrel of his flamer, balancing the back-thrust it was about to produce with an angle from his jump pack. The flamer screeched into life, sending a jet of chemical fire hissing through the air until it plumed and rushed around the pillar like water around rock. The darkness receded from the flames, as though scorched by its ferocity. From the other side of the pillar came a sharp explosion, like a grenade suddenly igniting after being unexpectedly superheated by the chemical fire. An armoured warrior rolled out from behind the stone column, accelerated but unhurt by the concussion. He rolled into a tight crouch and with one knee resting on the ground he raised his weapon and fired off two shots.

The bolts dove into the stream of flame and rocketed up against the current, seeking the source. Tenjin was an easy target – a fiery angel, hovering in a void of darkness. Ansatsu despatched his shots and then disappeared into the shadows. Tenjin twisted to the side, firing his jump pack suddenly, but the jets could not move him in time; the bolts punched squarely into his flamer, shattering its structure. In a single swift movement, Tenjin cast the flamer into the gloom and cut

the power to his jump pack. As the bolts ignited in his weapon, the flamer exploded into a blinding rage of chemical flames. It spiralled straight into the immovable stone of a giant column.

Hidden behind the sudden and impossibly bright flash, Tenjin dropped heavily into a crouch behind the altar at the centre of the temple. His landing cracked the immense flagstones at his feet, but he was instantly ready with his bolter braced on one knee behind the cover of the altar. With his jump pack extinguished and his flamer destroyed, Tenjin could be just as invisible as his foe.

'Come out, traitor!' Tenjin's voice echoed between the mighty columns that dwarfed the two Space Marines.

'It is you who are the traitor, Tenjin...' The echo decentred Ansatsu's voice, so Tenjin could not get a fix on his position. From behind the altar, Tenjin scanned the shadows with his red eyes and strained his ears in the sudden silence.

'You have violated the sanctity of a Temple of Sanguinius and attacked the honour guard of a high priest, one of Sanguinius's Chosen! You damn your soul, and those of your fallen Death Company. You do a great dishonour to our glorious Chapter-'

'No!' Tenjin could not listen to this. 'It is you who damn our souls through your polluted ways!' The red in his eyes grew darker as blood gushed into his brain, drowning his thoughts and curdling his intent.

The blood of Sanguinius flows in my veins, he thought. Just as he stood firm in the face of his death, so I shall not falter now. For the Emperor and Sanguinius!

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius! Death! Death comes for you!' Tenjin was on his feet, spraying fire from the hissing barrel of his remaining gun. The superheated air roared into a kinetic frenzy, forging a ring of flames around the chaplain as he swept the bolter from side to side. The giant stone pillars started to crack under the tirade; bubbles began to appear in the cracks. In an instant, the bases of two columns melted away into an ooze of molten rock and the stone above tumbled down to the ground in a deadly cascade of masonry. The distant ceiling split and collapsed, sending shards of decorated plascrete falling into the fray.

'Death! Death comes for you!' Tenjin was screaming as he brought the world down around him, firing a continuous barrage of

melta energy into the space within his Chapter's most holy sanctum.

Above the roar of the melta, Tenjin heard a metallic ring and the burst of jets. Suddenly, from amidst the ocean of fire and magma that oozed unstoppably over the ground, a figure rose into the air, blasting gravity away with the force of its jump pack. In one hand, Ansatsu held the Grail of the Angels Sanguine and, in the other, the Chapter's Exsanguinator – the symbols of his status as Sanguinary High Priest.

Ansatsu started to accelerate away from the liquid hell that was engulfing the floor of the temple. His jump pack flamed gloriously as it pushed him out of the fire and into the encompassing darkness of the majestic arched roof – a burning angel returning to heaven. But Tenjin was moving faster than thought. He had already discarded his melta-gun and clicked his jump pack back into life. Having discarded his heavy weapons, Tenjin was lighter than Ansatsu and he rocketed through the space between them like a bolt from a gun. Tenjin roared through the gathering shadows, feeding energy into his power fist, which hummed into life over his left arm.

Just as Ansatsu reached the hole in the roof, Tenjin caught him. There was no pause for breath, no hesitation, no ceremony, no thought. Tenjin ploughed into Ansatsu diagonally from below, punching his power fist straight through the armoured plate covering his stomach. The fist ripped through armour, flesh and bone, and then armour again, as it wrenched free out of Ansatsu's back, impaling him on Tenjin's arm. Ansatsu opened his mouth in pain and shock. His eyes focussed momentarily on Tenjin. Then he was dead.

The momentum carried Tenjin and Ansatsu out of the hole in the roof before Tenjin could bring his jump pack to a stop. He looked down from the moonlit sky, surveying the ruined Temple of Sanguinius and the litter of dead Space Marines in the courtyard in front of it. For the Emperor and Sanguinius.



INQUISITOR ADISS ALLOWED his hood to hide the horror on his face. On the steps of the temple he could see the chaplain kneeling before the hideously violated figure of Ansatsu. A torrent of blood

had gushed down the stairway, flooding out of the hole punched through his body, leaving the high priest in a pool of his own essence. The chaplain was soaked in blood and his eyes shone red. His power fist lay in the liquid that puddled at his feet and his naked hand held the Chapter's Grail, wrenched from the death-grip of his lord. In his right hand he held the Exsanguinator, rammed unceremoniously into the cavity in the high priest's abdomen. The device was working energetically, sucking out the sacred blood of Sanguinius's Chosen. But the chaplain was not collecting the precious fluid into the Exsanguinator's reservoir, rather he let it spurt and gush out of the machine into the thick pool around the body. It congealed and coagulated as it trickled and oozed across the chaplain's armour, coating him in a new layer of ichor.

The inquisitor had seen more than enough. He made a swift signal, sending a knot of his retinue scattering into an offensive arc, encircling the foot of the staircase that acted as a podium for the gruesome chaplain's performance. With another signal from Addiss, the Marines lifted their hellfire bolters and focussed their implacable attention on the Angel Sanguine at the apex of the steps. He ignored them, intent on his task.

'Chaplain! It is finished. Cease!'

Tenjin turned his head slowly, his burning eyes dancing from the shrouded inquisitor to the Deathwatch Marine at his left shoulder. There was a flicker of recognition. The chaplain squinted slightly, as though in disbelief that the killing had not yet ended. Was it disbelief or relief? He couldn't tell.

'Chaplain. If you cannot hear me, you will die.' Addiss knew that there was a point of no return. A place somewhere beyond humanity from whence even a Space Marine of the Angels Sanguine could not return. He watched the chaplain slowly rise to his feet, thick tendrils of blood running down his slick armoured form, adding to the pool at his feet. He could see the fiery red in the Angel's eyes and, for a moment, he feared the phantom of righteousness that burned deeply in his glare.

'There are things far worse than death...' Tenjin's voice was tremulous, yet it thundered. The blood was pounding in his head, disrupting his thoughts and dragging his voice from unknown depths within him. 'I do not fear you.'

There was a click and then a roar of energy as Tenjin's jump pack ignited once again. He rose slowly into the air, arms spread wide, with the Grail held aloft in his left hand. Droplets of blood fell from his feet, sending miniature tidal waves rippling through the pool around Ansatsu.

'I name you Traitor! Face me. For the Emperor! For the Emperor!' Tenjin's voice was incensed.

'You go too far,' muttered Addiss under his breath as he clenched his fist into the firing signal. A volley of bolts ripped through the air, focussed at the centre of the offensive arc, riddling Tenjin with tiny explosions. The impacts pushed him back through the air and smashed him into the heavy doors of the temple. There was a mighty crunch as the collision sent splinters flying and decimated the jump pack on Tenjin's back. He slumped to the ground, crumpled and broken.

Climbing the steps towards the temple and the fallen Angel, Addiss paused to survey the scene. The inquisitor's retinue remained at their posts, guns trained on the ruined chaplain, overseeing the bloody mess of the high priest on the temple steps. Beyond them lay the gold-tinted bodies of Ansatsu's honour guard – the Chapter's standard fluttering forlornly in the gentle night breeze, still clutched in the dead fingers of the standard bearer. Interspersed amongst the bodies were those of Death Company Marines, the chaplain's own guard, who had fought to their deaths, first against their own Chapter and then finally against the might of the inquisitor's retinue.

'For the Emperor. For Sanguinius,' whispered Addiss in awed disbelief.



'DO YOU KNOW where you are?

Tenjin opened his eyes and tried to look around. His head would not turn; thick straps of adamantium ran taut across his forehead and chin, clamping him to the cold table. He lifted his gaze to the face of the interrogator. 'No,' he said.

Addiss looked down at the chaplain. The red had faded from his eyes, leaving them glazed and slightly pink. The Angel Sanguine had been stripped of his armour and then strapped to the Lestrallio Tablet.

Thick scars covered his skin, punctuated occasionally by the fresh craters left by the bolter shells of the inquisitorial retinue. Tenjin's augmented body was already healing the wounds. The blood had clotted and scar tissue was beginning to knit over the holes in his flesh.

'No? But you have been here before, chaplain. You have seen this place before, albeit from a slightly different perspective.'

The bright light above the table shone directly into Tenjin's sore eyes and disoriented him. He squinted and searched his field of vision for clues. The apothecarion. Of course. They had brought him to the apothecarion. Tenjin had been here many times as a chaplain of the Angels Sanguine. He had manacled his most desperate battle-brothers in adamantium and strapped them to this table. He had watched them thrash and spasm, spilling their tortured minds through their mouths until the Black Rage finally destroyed them totally – crushing their consciousness and snapping their spines with a last violent twist. He had listened to the rantings of Angels lost in the echoing visions of Sanguinius's death aboard the battle barge of Horus himself, reliving those moments of hell as though they were their own. This was the place where the curse of the Blood Angels Legion found its most pitiful voice – no glorious death in combat, swamped under insurmountable enemies, battling to the last – just the screams and shivers of a solitary Marine, alone with his inalienable nature.

Tenjin laughed quietly, blood gurgling thickly in his throat. How pathetic. Did this inquisitor really think that the source of the curse could be divined on Lestrallio's Tablet? Lestrallio himself had died in terrified lunacy strapped to a table just like this one, screaming at a phantom of Horus: 'I name you Traitor!' Does this inquisitor really think that I am so lost to myself that I need to be bound to this fate? Does he think that this is about the Rage, that I succumbed in the midst of my own?

'I see that you recognise your place at last, chaplain.' Addiss watched Tenjin's amused eyes in confusion. The glaze was fading, and the chaplain was gradually recovering the pristine, penetrating stare that revealed the clarity of his mind.

'You must answer some questions.'

'What do you hope to learn from me, inquisitor? Why didn't you kill me?' Tenjin's amusement was balanced precariously against a rising sense of suspicion.

'I am here partly because your actions forced me to intervene in the internal affairs of a Space Marine Chapter. You and your battle-brothers killed the Sanguinary High Priest and slaughtered his honour guard. Your chaotic mutiny was only thwarted by my intervention – who else could cleanse the twisted mess you created?'

'You are here to judge me, then? Would you judge Sanguinius?'

The inquisitor paused over this apparent blasphemy. 'Only the Emperor can judge you. I am here merely to understand you and your kind. You will answer some questions. Let's begin three months ago, when High Priest Ansatsu Rakuten transferred you from the First Company down to the Tenth...'



'**A**S YOU WISH, my lord.' Tenjin bowed deeply, touching his right fist to his heart. He stood upright, looked straight into Ansatsu's eyes for an instant, and then turned to leave. His anger was suppressed and barely noticeable – effectively transmuted into a dignified bearing.

Ansatsu watched his veteran chaplain carefully. He had known Tenjin for more years than a normal man would ever witness. The chaplain was the best of the Angels Sanguine. He was glorious in battle and meticulous in his duty to administer to the cursed and the doomed. Before every battle, Tenjin would wander amongst his company, stripped of his armour, carrying his ceremonial Death Mask under his arm. As he approached, each Angel would drop to one knee and clasp his right fist to his chest. Tenjin would stop, kneel before his flock, gaze deeply into their eyes and say nothing. Nothing at all. The blessing of silence before the storm to come. Under his influence, fewer Angels were lost to the Black Rage on the eve of battle. He reassured them, inspiring them with pride and courage, suppressing the desperate thirst for blood that bubbled just below the surface.

When First Company Chaplain Reontrek had died, Tenjin had been the natural replacement. The body of Reontrek had been found deep in the catacombs of Hegelian IX, where the Death Company had been unleashed to root out and slaughter the remnants of a defeated tyrannid horde. The

company had rampaged through the cavernous underworld, slaughtering indiscriminately, slaking their lust with alien blood. It seems that the tyranids vanished before the Thirst, and the Death Company continued its search and destroy mission for several weeks before they were brought back under control by the high priest himself: Sanguinius's Chosen enwrapped in the holy Shroud of Servius and bearing the Standard of the Angels Sanguine. Only a power that inspired such awe could arrest the Rage of the Death Company.

Ansatsu had found the body of Reontrek, torn to pieces by the maniacal fury of his own company. The chamber was strewn with fragments of black armour coated in viscous streams of blood. The bodies of six Marines lay in varying stages of dismemberment, some still twitching pathetically, crying out for battle. It was then that Ansatsu had resolved to make Tenjin the next Death Company chaplain. Tenjin would bring the Rage under control, or he would die trying.

The young chaplain had been greatly honoured and had excelled where Reontrek had failed. Never again had the Chapter lost control of its Death Company; it was transformed by the rigid discipline and quiet inspiration of its new chaplain. Yet Ansatsu had not seemed altogether pleased by these long decades. He watched Tenjin like a hawk, suspicious and cynical.

Tenjin could feel Ansatsu's eyes boring into his back as he walked from the Temple of Sanguinius, fresh from his demotion. I will not turn around, he thought as he walked purposefully down the great staircase that dropped away from the imposing doors at the entranceway. His footfalls resounded heavily on the stone, echoing the gravity of his thoughts. A swirl of wind whipped a red dust cloud into a shroud around his descending form. The sands of this desert planet stirred and Tenjin paused on the last step to allow them to engulf him. When the dust finally cleared, he was gone.



'SO YOU KILLED him to avenge your honour? Your anger became your Rage?' Addiss fired the accusation from nowhere, forcing a logical step where Tenjin could not see one.

'No, inquisitor. My honour was not slighted. All service in the name of the Emperor and Sanguinius is of equal honour. I killed him because he was a traitor. For the Emperor and Sanguinius, I took death to him.'

The inquisitor watched the sparkling eyes of the chaplain focus with determined resolution. 'But you were affronted by the actions of the high priest. You were angered by his treatment of you.' No longer questions, but statements.

It was not anger. But there had been Rage. 'I could not understand why he would transfer me from my station in the First Company. I was the only chaplain who could keep the Death Company under control. Ansatsu knew this.'

'So, your pride was your undoing?'

Tenjin smiled painfully and a bubble of blood caught in his throat. He coughed, straining the muscles in his neck against the adamantium shackles. 'No, inquisitor. My pride was Ansatsu's undoing. It made me suspicious of his motives.'



THE HOODED FIGURE knelt silently, gaze fixed on the floor, the black of his ornate power armour glinting where it was revealed beneath the folds of his heavy cloak. He was perfectly motionless, rigid in fierce deference and discipline.

Ansatsu considered the hunched figure for a few moments, inspecting the battered Angels Sanguine insignia on his shoulder, etched magnificently at a time before the high priest had even been born. He let his eyes caress the lines of the angelic wings, feeling them slide along a series of deep gashes in the figure's chest plates until they fell into the eye sockets of the Deathwatch's skull on the other shoulder. What kind of claws could have made such channels in the armour of a Space Marine, pondered Ansatsu with interest?

'Welcome home, librarian.'

Ashok lifted his eyes to meet those of the high priest and could see the sincerity in those words. There was more than welcome in Ansatsu's eyes – delight perhaps.

'It is good to be back, my lord.' In truth, Ashok had never considered Baalus Trine his home. The traditionally peripatetic Chapter had relocated on this irradiated rock only shortly before he had been summoned by the

Deathwatch. He had not returned even once during the intervening decades.

‘It is an honour to see you again, Ashok.’

‘The honour of service is mine, my lord.’ The librarian had served under Ansatsu for only a year, between his ascension to high priest on Baalus Trine and his own call from the Deathwatch.

‘You will find much changed.’ Ansatsu searched Ashok’s eyes for something unspoken before he continued. ‘And for the better, I think.’

‘I have heard of some new developments here on Baalus Trine – interesting developments.’ Ashok returned the high priest’s gaze with a casual undertone of curiosity.

Ansatsu seemed satisfied. ‘Just today I have felt it necessary to remove a veteran chaplain from his position in the Death Company – you may remember Chaplain Tenjin?’

‘Indeed I do. He was a chaplain in the Second Company when I left. A solid man, I thought. I recall that he was assigned to the Death Company after that business on Hegelian IX.’

Of course, Ashok had been one of the survivors of the Hegelian IX expedition. He had slaughtered seven of his Death Company brethren before bringing his Thirst under control by the force of his own will – mastering it and transforming his Rage into an awesome weapon. He had been presented with the Shroud of Lemartes – guardian of the damned – and the Deathwatch had called for him almost immediately. Ansatsu smiled as the realisation grounded itself in his thoughts. ‘I perceive pollution in our midst again, librarian, and Tenjin might better serve us elsewhere. We will see what the Death Company can do without this chaplain.’

Ashok nodded gravely. He had heard rumours of this pollution. ‘Tell me more about this Tenjin and the corruption of our purity.’



THE FIRST COMPANY scouts knelt in formation, heads bowed and fists clasped to their chests. They were arrayed before their attack bikes, which gleamed in the desert sun. The red dust speckled the armoured panels, hazing over the gold trim, the bulging tires and the black exhaust tubes that bristled out of the massive engine blocks. The scouts were bedecked in light battle armour, wearing the colours of the

Angels Sanguine with the fresh pride of recent initiates. A crisp, vertical line bisected the armoured suits, separating the fathomless black of the left-hand side from the blood-red of the right. The warriors’ armour, like their nature, was split between the glory of a bloody battle and the darkness that lurks within a bloodthirsty soul.

The scouts of the Angels Sanguine wore no helmets; Tenjin could gaze directly into the eyes of each as he passed along the line, inspecting his new company. Each pupil blazed, fierce with deference and courage. Tenjin poured his wisdom into his stare and said nothing. In the eyes of some he could see sparks of recognition, fractions of moments in which the scout opened himself to Tenjin’s influence; flickers of relief and self-assurance danced in the fires of their determination. But from others Tenjin received nothing. Blank eyes returned his gaze; eyes replete with hostility and violence. Impatient eyes. It was in these looks that Tenjin paused, delving deeper into the souls that they reflected.

There are too many. Tenjin hesitated at the end of the line and turned to take it in again. Too many are balanced too finely. He walked slowly back along the inspection line of his new company, pausing, lingering in front of nine separate scouts. They are right on the cusp, teetering on the brink of the abyss, desperately seeking combat. Too desperately. There are too many, he thought, an entire squad. The chaplain touched his hand to the forehead of the nine tainted scouts, muttering a mantra, and then walked swiftly off into his reclusium. The nine sprang to their feet and followed their chaplain, their heavy boots kicking up eddies of sand as they marched.

‘You nine will accompany me as my honour guard,’ explained Tenjin as the others stood to attention. It might be the only way to control them once the enemy is sighted, he thought. Nothing fights the Thirst better than pride. ‘We will form a single squad, together.’

The scouts barked their enthusiasm in unison. They were keen to impress their new chaplain, especially one as celebrated as Tenjin.

‘Local intelligence reports possible contamination in one of the settlements on the far side of the Bhabatrix Mountains. We will investigate and, if necessary, purify the contamination. Understood?’

Tenjin was concerned. Nine new scouts seemed destined to succumb to the Rage in the battle to come – their very first battle as Angels Sanguine. This was an unprecedented

figure, especially amongst such recent initiates. The Thirst usually took time to develop. Exposure to battle. Experience of shedding blood and slaughtering the enemies of the Emperor. Internalising the tragic mission of Sanguinius. These were the factors that usually seemed to induce the Thirst. Incidents increased gradually the longer an Angel served. The First Company, the Death Company, was full of veterans, the oldest, most experienced and most blood-drenched warriors of the Chapter.

Nonetheless, the Death Company held its name for a reason. Its Marines, the mightiest and most invulnerable of all Space Marines, brought death to innumerable enemies of the Emperor. They also brought death to themselves. Lost in the craze of the Rage, thirsting for blood, violence and combat, many would take on vastly superior numbers of the enemy – more than even a Death Company Angel could defeat. No matter how glorious or magnificent the victories of the Death Company, fewer would return to Baalus Trine than had departed. The Death Company suffered more losses than any other company of the Angels Sanguine – bathing in more blood than even Khorne could crave. Tenjin shivered at the thought of the fate of his predecessor on Hegelian IX.

Nine novice scouts on the verge of the Rage seemed incredible, but Tenjin pushed his concern to the back of his mind. Perhaps I am wrong about them. Perhaps they are just awestruck. It has been a long time since I looked into the eyes of such inexperienced warriors. Let us see what combat does to their souls.



THE HIGH PRIEST reclined languorously into the thick, viscous fluid, letting it slip around his body, coating his exposed skin in a deep, lustrous red, seeping gradually through the nodal points in his carapace. He lay back into his ceremonial sarcophagus, inscribed with the ancient glyphs of previous high priests, permitting the blood to flood around his form, leaving only his face and chest exposed to the quiet reverence of the temple air.

‘My children, you may leave,’ whispered Ansatsu in a voice that echoed and snaked around the silence of the pillars in the sanctum.

A clutch of three men bowed deeply and unclasped the mechanisms from their necks, letting shiny droplets of blood speckle down onto the pristine white of the flagstone floor. After long moments of deference, the men eased out of their bows and shuffled awkwardly out of the sacred chamber, their bizarrely muscled forms forcing them to limp and stoop as they went. By the time they had gone, a heavy tablet had scraped into place in front of Ansatsu’s face, sealing him into the ritual rest of a Sanguinary high priest.

He lay in meditation, feeling the delicate pressure of the blood enwrapping his body, replacing the customary, firm metallic touch of his armour with the tepid embrace of the fresh fluid. Tiny waves rippled into tranquillity as they eased their way through the nodal mechanisms of the high priest’s carapace, drawn in by some long forgotten osmotic process.

Ansatsu closed his eyes and concentrated on the flow of his blood, visualising the gradual intermingling of the fresh with the staid, pumping the new vitality around his augmented body under the enhanced pressure of two hearts. The blood coursed through his omophageae organ and he could feel the effect immediately. A gradual warmth spread through his body, dappling his skin with rains of pain and pleasure, disorienting his senses and rendering the immersion tank into a box of blades and fire. Ansatsu twitched, sending ripples and splashes around the dark interior of the sarcophagus. The glory of Sanguinius burned in his blood.

With a sudden hiss of depressurisation the elaborate lid of the high priest’s sarcophagus retracted into the wall of the sanctum and a rush of cold, dry air slapped Ansatsu in the face. His eyes snapped open and he sat bolt upright, sending a red shower sleeting over the edge of his tank, splattering the decorated exterior of another of the sarcophagi that lined the wall of the ritual chamber.

Ansatsu got up and walked across the cold floor, blood cascading into a trail at his heels, to the altar where the Exsanguinator was kept. Lifting it from its podium, the high priest clicked the mechanism into place over the dedicated valve in his neck, which had been installed as part of the ritual of ascension to the high priesthood. The device buzzed into life immediately, awoken by the trace of Sanguinius flowing through it. The mechanism clucked quietly, sucking a supply of Ansatsu’s precious blood into a reservoir in

the hilt of the Exsanguinator. Finally, pulling the machine from his neck, he detached the reservoir and poured small quantities into each of the ceremonial goblets that adorned the altar, ready for the internalisation of the neophytes and recent initiates.



THE NIGHT WAS broken by the orange beams of the low moon as the bike squadron roared through the narrow mountain pass, sending torrents of rocks tumbling into the abyss. Powerful headlamps cast startling cones of light across the mountainscape, floodlighting the column of scouts from within. The path was only wide enough for single file, but the riders were confident and undaunted. They bounced and swerved their way over the uneven terrain, skirting the sheer drop to their left and scraping the paint from their armour against the mountain side on the right.

Tenjin raised his hand in a fist and slid his bike to a halt on the crest of the rise. The engine cut and the lights died as his squadron fell into silent obedience behind him. He was silhouetted against the moon, shimmering in an aura of golden light. Tenjin had an eye for drama, but he also knew the function of awe when leading squadrons of the cursed. He clicked the comm.

There was a hiss of static. 'Silence now. Nagaboshi and Endo with me. The rest, hold position here.'

Two scouts from the front of the line dismounted and marched to take positions alongside Tenjin. The three of them stood magnificently astride the top of the mountain pass. The moonlight played around their armour, sending sparks of brilliance dancing into the thin air. The other scouts gazed at their battle-brothers in awe, pride swelling in their chests.

Below them, tucked under a ledge in the precipice, was a makeshift camp. A fire burned gloomily in its heart, spewing thick curdles of smoke into the sky, blotting out the stars and threatening the moon. Figures were moving spasmodically in the spaces between the tents and the flames. They were jerking and shuddering, twisting their naked forms into bizarre contortions and laughing. Laughing loudly. In the background there

was a faint, pulsating impact. Its power drove the figures into renewed frenzies of motion.

The chaplain took a step forward and brought his enhanced vision into tighter focus. The faces of the figures were wide-eyed and their mouths hung open. Dribbles of spittle trickled indelicately from their teeth, as though they were slightly rabid, running down their chins and necks before splashing across their abdomens like body paint. No. Not body paint, blood! The patterns on their chests looked worryingly familiar.

Tenjin quickly scanned the rest of the camp. Figures sat languorously in the dust, knees pulled up to their chests, rocking slightly, blood oozing from the corner of their mouths. Some pulled chunks of meat out of the fire and gnashed at it hungrily, licking their lips like salivating dogs. A desperate group stood fearfully, chained to each other and to the mountain face at the side of the cave under the ledge.

The smoke swirled into a dense column, gyring back and forth like a lazy tornado. Then it clicked. The black smoke, the bloody mouths, the tearing of flesh. Tenjin strained his eyes into the fire. The flames leapt and flickered crazily, they crackled and hissed, spitting sizzling shards of fat into the faces of the lunatic figures. The flames seemed to burn with an unusual red, tinted into orange by the reflection of the moon and the hunger of the fire.

There was a hand. It had been licked clean of flesh by the flames, but it was a human hand. It reached out of the fire as though thrown out for help; the last desperate action of a drowning man. Other forms began to resolve themselves in the fire. Feet, heads and legs. Tens of them, piled on top of each other and set alight. A gargantuan pile of burning flesh, sending pungent plumes of death into the night sky.

'What are they doing, sir?' Endo's eyes were taught and perplexed. He was horrified and fascinated all at once.

'Dancing, Endo. They are dancing,' Tenjin turned to the scout and looked into his eyes. They were burning and tinged with red. 'Just dancing,' he said gently, narrowing his gaze.

'What should we do, brother-chaplain?' Nagaboshi's low voice broke Tenjin's concentration. He turned to face the other scout and was shocked to see his eyes wild and blood riddled. 'We must do something!' Nagaboshi insisted, his voice being dragged from some unfathomable depth.

Tenjin paused for a moment, searching in the eyes of the scout, looking for something more or less than the urgency of blood. He could see nothing. Turning back to the grisly and gruesome party below them, he scanned the scene once more. The macabre dancers still twitched and twisted around the fire, the blood markings on their chests spelling out the sign of Khorne. The chaplain had to fight with himself to control his own Rage – he could feel it pulsing under his diaphragm, prodding him into rapid, shallow breathing. In his mind he whispered the *Moripatris*, drawing the thoughts deep into his lungs and letting them deepen his breathing back into normalcy.

‘You two, with me,’ he commanded in a powerful whisper that permitted no resistance. The two scouts turned and followed Tenjin back to the waiting squad, snatching impatient glances back over their shoulders as they crept through the mountain darkness. At least they were following, Tenjin thought.

From a receptacle protruding from the back of his bike, Tenjin withdrew a spherical package, wrapped carefully in a shimmering black cloth. He unfolded the velvety material with care, revealing the stylised, bespiked skull of his Death Mask. It glinted with depths of darkness in the moonlight, emanating new shades of black into the night. The mask hissed into place as Tenjin pulled it over his head, the latches securing themselves into his carapace with unerring precision. Tenjin’s face was gone and the scouts found themselves gazing into the face of Death himself – inhuman eyes burning with purple intensity in the skeletal sockets.

With the scouts of the Angels Sanguine arrayed before him, Death gripped his right fist to his chest, clasping the glowing rosarius medallion tightly in his hand – the soul armour of a Space Marine chaplain, a reluctant gift from the Ecclesiarchy. In his left, the chaplain held forth the crozius arcanum, his staff of office. The wings of Sanguinius radiated from the crozius, spilling fountains of red light from the droplet of his blood enshrined in its heart, bathing the scouts in an aura of purity.

I can do no more than this, Tenjin worried inside himself, looking into the mixed expressions of awe and impatience before him as he invoked the ritual of *Moripatris* – the mass of doom.

‘For the Emperor and Sanguinius! Death! Death comes for the deviants!’

‘Death comes for the deviants!’ enjoined the scout squad with a single voice.

In an instant the scouts were back on their assault bikes, engines purring with impatient power. Tenjin was at the head of the column, riddled with anxiety about his novice team, torn between a deep-felt need to annihilate the deviants on the other side of this mountain and an equally deep concern that this side of the mountain hosted an infinitely more dangerous deviance. He pushed the thoughts aside – battle will reveal their souls.

Raising the crozius above his head he shouted, ‘For the Emperor and Sanguinius!’ Tenjin’s bike roared into life, bursting over the crest of the path in a blaze of blood reds and blacks, gilded with gold. Behind him came his column of righteousness, each Marine leaving the ground as he cleared the pass, their bikes leaping the sharp descent in a single jump, before thudding and skidding into the dust in the midst of the repugnant camp. Headlamps blazed brighter than the flames of the cannibalistic fire and the staccato onslaught of bolter fire drowned out the drums of the dancers.



THE LIBRARIAN GENTLY pushed back his hood, revealing his unshadowed face to the high priest for the first time since his return. ‘Thank you,’ he said, accepting the glass of red liquid from the outstretched arm of Ansatsu.

The two Marines knelt ceremonially, facing each other across a silent space, underspread with the ancient Shroud of Servius. There were no attendants and no surveillance servitors in this place – they were quite alone.

Ansatsu watched intently as the librarian drank deeply from his glass. ‘It has been a long time since I have tasted the blood of Baalus Trine,’ conceded Ashok.

‘It is sweet, is it not?’

‘It does have a special quality, indeed.’

‘The Deathwatch must change a Marine – even a librarian,’ mused Ansatsu, as though to himself.

‘Yes, but change comes in many forms and from many places,’ replied Ashok with a faint smile, toying with the residue of his drink, swirling the blood into a whirlpool. He looked up, fixing Ansatsu’s eyes with his

own, which seemed to glitter with an unfathomable blackness at their core. 'Things are changing here too.'

'Had you not left so soon after our adoption of this planet as our home – so soon after I was honoured with the position of high priest – you would understand the changes more completely. After Hegelian IX, I had great hopes for you.'

Ashok nodded his head slightly, reaching out with his thoughts and testing the substance of Ansatsu's words. 'Yes, I can see that now. But the Deathwatch also had plans for me, and it was my honour to serve. For the Emperor and Sanguinius.'



THE CULTISTS fell like animals, squealing and running in panic. No, not in panic, in pleasure, Tenjin reflected as he watched the appalling features of a bloody, crazed face dissolve under the impact of his power fist. It was an orgy and a blood bath all at once.

For a few moments the scout squad maintained its formation – the column circling around the camp, herding the deviants into a tight pack and then loosing bolts into the dense group. Tenjin had pulled his bike over into the shadows on the outskirts of the camp, just beyond the flickering light cast by the fire, picking off stragglers and the particularly fleet of foot. His power fist hummed with life and dispensed instant death to all those who glimpsed his terrifying features.

Not many had escaped the tactics of the squad and the chaplain soon slid his bike to a standstill and surveyed the scene. He was relieved to see the discipline of the rookie squad, their clinical workmanship as they whipped the cultists into a spiralling pen of execution. And he watched the cultists themselves, each bearing the mark of Khorne etched into their chests with blood, each perversely elated about their blood-drenched fate. They offered little resistance – this was not really a battle fit for Space Marines.

As the relief settled into his thoughts, Tenjin began to notice more details. The cultists were deformed. Some had scales piercing the skin on their arms. Others had the suggestion of aborted limbs sprouting from their

abdomens. Most were overly muscular, yet stooped in stature, as though their muscles had outgrown their skeletons and pulled them back into themselves. Some seemed blind, just running into circles because of the momentum of the crowd.

But it was not just the cultists. The prisoners chained at the edge of the camp were similarly mutated. Tenjin glanced back and forth between the prisoners and the cultists – the only visible difference was the grotesque brand of Khorne on the chests of the cattle at the centre of the scouts' ring of death.

Suddenly the scout squad broke formation. First to go was Nagaboshi, who swerved his bike violently out of the column, skidding the back wheel in an arc and then gunning the engine. Nagaboshi roared forward into the heart of the cultists firing wildly with his bolter, riddling the cattle with shells, punching holes through bodies and the crowd. In an instant he was upon them, his bike scything through the bloody bodies, crushing bones and skulls under its weight until the shear mass of the crowd brought it to a halt. Then Nagaboshi was on his feet, spinning frantically in the heart of the cultists, loosing bolts in all directions. The shells from his bolter started to escape the rapidly thinning crowd, some punching into the armour of the encircling scouts, who rapidly broke formation.

Endo leapt from his bike as a bolter shell smacked into the engine block, sending jets of steam rising into the night. He cast his own bolter aside and pounced into the remains of the cultists, grabbing at figures with his bare hands, tearing limbs from bodies.

The other scouts scattered throughout the rest of the camp on their bikes, cutting down any deviant that they could find. Tenjin watched in horror as a knot of bikers roared passed the manacled prisoners and gunned them down in a merciless drive-by.

The chaplain kicked his bike back into life and held the crozius aloft, urging energy into the staff and flooding the camp with the aura of Sanguinius. By the time he reached the centre of the camp, projecting a litany of control from his Death Mask, Endo had fought his way through the remnants of the cultists and was upon Nagaboshi in a flash. He smacked his fist into the back of his battle brother, shattering his spine and sending him sprawling forward into the sand.

Tenjin slammed the shaft of the Crozius into the ground and a bright light burst from the blood of Sanguinius held in its core. The scouts

lurched into immobility all over the camp, stunned by the flood of awe that rushed out over them. They strained against the invisible leashes, as though battling with constraints secured deeply within them. Endo rocked visibly and then fell to ground holding his head in agony.

The chaplain stood majestically in the centre of the camp, emblazoned and radiant with the power of Sanguinius pulsing in his hands. There was blood everywhere, soaking into the sands and gathering into pools around the piles of corpses. Not a single tribesman was left standing. They were all dead. Cultist and prisoners alike. Including Nagaboshi, three scouts were also dead – although there was no way that the primitives of Khorne could have slain a Marine.



‘EXPLAIN YOURSELF, chaplain.’ The high priest stood impassively before the altar in the Temple of Sanguinius. Behind him was a Marine that Tenjin felt he should recognise. He bore the insignia of the Deathwatch on one shoulder plate and held the ornate force staff of a librarian in his right hand. His face was hidden under the folds of his Psychic Hood.

Tenjin was kneeling before them. ‘The tribesmen were followers of Khorne, my lord. They were also mutants. Purification was required.’ The chaplain knew that this was not the desired response.

‘Yes, but what of the villagers, the prisoners of the cultists?’

‘They too were mutants, my lord.’

‘But not cultists?’

‘No, my lord. They were sacrificial prisoners of the cultists.’

‘You are aware, brother chaplain, that all the tribes of Baalus Trine are at least slightly mutated, thanks to the radiation of this inhospitable world? We may be far from Baal Primus here, but it took the Angels Sanguine many centuries to find its first home world with conditions similar enough to that of the Blood Angels. Since then, we have passed through a long succession of planets over the millennia, but only this world has warranted the name of Baalus. We have settled here for a reason. Our gene-seed requires hosts with a genetic make-up compatible with those of our

father Chapter, compatible with the people chosen by Sanguinius himself. The people here must be protected, they are part of our nature. Might I remind you, chaplain, that I myself was born on this planet.’

‘I could not prevent their slaughter, my lord. The scouts were enraged by the deviance.’

‘You could not, or would not, brother chaplain?’ intoned the hooded librarian.

‘And what of the dead scouts, Tenjin? What of Endo, who even now lays half-mad, ranting on the Table of Lestrallio in the Apothecarion?’ There was an odd quality in Ansatsu’s tone that made Tenjin recoil. The librarian also shifted his stance slightly, as though steadying his own thoughts. There was a vague sense of elation in the air.

Tenjin flicked his gaze from the high priest to the librarian and back again. Something was wrong. The Deathwatch Marine was no stranger here; he bore the markings of an Angel Sanguine, battered and scraped by innumerable encounters with unspeakable foes. When did he return to the Chapter, and what horrors did he bring back in the darkness of his expanded consciousness?

‘You are confined to your quarters, chaplain, until we determine your fate.’ The high priest waved his left hand casually and the librarian clicked to attention, bowed slightly, and then stepped up to escort Tenjin back to his rooms.



THE ADAMANTIUM door slid closed behind him with a solid crunch, leaving Tenjin alone in his sparse quarters. He thought back over the events of the last weeks. He had been demoted from the Veteran First Company by the high priest, despite the fact that he was the only chaplain who could control their Rage. For an anxious minute, Tenjin wondered what kind of havoc the Death Company was raging out in the frontiers without him, while he had been reassigned to the novice Tenth Company, the scouts – a company always in need of guidance, to be sure, but not usually one teetering on the cusp of the Thirst.

Nonetheless, on his first mission, a fairly routine home world scouting sortie, he had lost control of an entire squad. The scouts had

slaughtered indiscriminately, even killing three of their own. One was so lost to himself that he was even now strapped under adamantium shackles, raging against his daemons on the Tablet of Lestrallio. Tenjin had never heard of a scout being so utterly lost.

On the other side of the chamber, Tenjin spied his battered copy of the *Codex Sanguine*. His was one of the few original copies that remained, inherited from the veteran Chaplain Reontrek. It contained the restricted sections on the curse that the Angels Sanguine had inherited from the Blood Angels – only chaplains and the high priests were permitted access to these pages. Tenjin clicked a switch, releasing the transparent cabinet that controlled the atmosphere around the ancient text. He carefully lifted the volume from its pedestal and sat in meditation. The familiar pages washed through him; he didn't need to read them, for long ago they were committed to his photographic memory. Holding the book merely reassured him – he was touching a piece of the Angels' ancient legacy. He read in contemplative silence, with his eyelids gently closed over his tired eyes.

So it was that after the terrible death of Sanguinius the Blood Angels Legion was divided into myriad successors, of which the Angels Sanguine were the most glorious and faithful to his image. But the blood of Sanguinius himself no longer ran with life, so what little remained was drained into the Red Grail of the Blood Angels, from whence it was consumed by the high priests of the successor Chapters. Thus could the blood and vitality of Sanguinius be preserved in the bodies of his children. New initiates and neophytes in the Angels Sanguine would be injected with the blood of their high priest and would drink from the Grail of Angels, overflowing with this blood, partaking in the essence of Sanguinius himself through the medium of his Chosen One. The omophagae organ of the neophyte then works to transpose the blood of Sanguinius's Chosen into the soul of each Marine – thus each successor Chapter gradually took on the characteristics of its high priests, the Chosen. The Angels Sanguine drew their essence from Sanguinius himself and from the courage and honour of Servius, the first high priest of this ancient Chapter –

Tenjin broke out of his meditation, struck by a terrible realisation. He scanned his enhanced memory, searching for recollections of each Marine to whom he had administered as they succumbed to the Rage

or the Thirst. The pattern was undeniable – before Ansatsu had become the high priest, the Rage was focussed in the veteran companies of the Angels Sanguine, presumably brought on by increasing and persistent exposure to bloody battle. Since Ansatsu had taken the Grail of Angels, however, incidents of the Rage had started to increase in the more junior companies. Tenjin's recent experience with the scout squad was the culmination of a definite trend.

He remembered what Ansatsu said to him in the temple: all the tribes of Baalus Trine are at least slightly mutated. There had been a hint of satisfaction to his tone, Tenjin realised in hindsight. He also realised that the Angels Sanguine drew their new recruits from these mutants – that Ansatsu himself had been recruited from amongst their number, the first Baalus Trine Marine to rise to the rank of high priest. In the blood of the high priest runs a strain of deviance! Tenjin could hardly contain his visceral response to this insight, and he was on his feet in an instant, searching for a weapon. The purest blood of Sanguinius was diluted and curdled by the sullied blood of Ansatsu before being injected into the neophytes – of course the Thirst would strike increasingly at the novices, as the essence of Sanguinius was drowned out by the pollution of Ansatsu. The Grail of Angels was transformed into a Grail of Damnation. How long would it take for the whole Chapter to be ruined beyond repair? By the Throne, numbers were low enough already. Tenjin resolved that this must end, now.



E NDO, CAN YOU hear me, my child?' Ansatsu gazed affectionately down at the young scout and smiled. 'Well done, my son. Well done.' The scout bucked and thrashed under the adamantium shackles, shrieking at the unseen images that tortured his soul and screaming in agony as his blood burned.



IN FULL BATTLE armour, resplendent in blood red on his right and deathly black on his left, Chaplain Tenjin pulled his Death Mask over his head and grabbed his flamer and melta-gun. The Rosarius glowed righteously, suspended over his primary heart on a chain of some long forgotten metal. On his back, his jump pack hummed quietly, waiting impatiently to burst into life on his command.

The chaplain flicked a krak grenade at the locked doors of his chamber. It detonated on impact, blasting the door violently out into the corridor. Tenjin stepped through the residual flames, emerging into the passageway beyond like the phantom of death itself. Two of his guards had been killed instantly, squashed into pulp by the sudden impact of the heavy adamantium. The others just stared at the chaplain looming over them in terrible clarity, flames licking at his armour, purple eyes piercing their souls from the depths of his Death Mask. The guards, dazed from the concussion and terror, turned and ran, vanishing into the maze of corridors – Tenjin let them go, not caring about the alarms that they would raise.

The route to the temple took Tenjin through the holding cells around the Apothecarion, the secured encampment of Death Company initiates while they waited to join their cursed battle-brothers on campaigns off-world. The chaplain blew the doors without a moment's hesitation, detonating a melta-bomb against the blast shields. Once inside, Tenjin was unsurprised to see the remnants of his scout squad, bedecked in the black armour of the Death Company. A chaplain knelt before them, chanting a litany of tranquillity, keeping them in control of themselves until they would be needed in battle. Without pausing for breath, Tenjin fired off a pulse of melta, instantly rendering the head of the shocked chaplain into a pool of molten flesh and bone.

'You six with me!' he demanded with a whispered authority that the novice Death Company could not resist. 'There is blood to be spilt. For the Emperor and Sanguinius!'

'For the Emperor and Sanguinius!' rejoined the Death Company as they chased out of the chamber, hot on the heels of the veteran chaplain, eager to please the awesome figure and desperate for battle.

The corridors were alive with guardsmen, digging themselves into junctions and blind corners. But they were no match for the rampage of the Death Company, which

scythed through them, leaving a wake of blood and screams.

By the time Tenjin reached the temple, Ansatsu's honour guard were arrayed before it. His standard bearer stood forward of the group, raising the banner of the Angels Sanguine for the charging Death Company to see. 'In the name of Sanguinius and his rightful Chosen, cease this treachery!'

The Death Company slowed, their already confused minds tugged in two different directions at once as the symbolism of their own standard yanked at their thoughts. But Tenjin was ready for this and was immediately at the front of the charge, his Rosarius blazing with life and his Death Mask filling his squad with awe. He fired his flamer as he ran, letting the flames plume out before him, obliterating the image of the standard bearer. This was enough, and the Death Company ploughed on through the flames to engage the honour guard – stoked with their own powerful sense of righteousness. By the time they caught sight of the standard again, it was too late, the two forces were already locked in combat and the formidable momentum of the Rage had obliterated their ability to reason.

Tenjin himself was in the air above the battle, the jets of his jump pack roaring with life as he cursed the cowardice of Ansatsu, hidden behind his honour guard in the sanctuary of his great temple. The chaplain blazed a fiery path through the night sky, heading for the roof of the temple, which bristled with the ugly, gothic magnificence of gargoyles and jagged turrets.

Another krak grenade and the roof was open – a gap large enough for a Space Marine yawning into the darkness below, and Tenjin was through it before the rain of masonry had even fallen to the ground. Casting his Death Mask aside, he left the battle raging outside, searching for his prize in the shadowy interior. He gunned the engine of his jump pack. The burners roared, ripping the heavily shadowed air into strips of flame...



I THINK THAT I know the story from here,' said Inquisitor Addiss, leaning back from the Tablet of Lestrallio and clicking a switch to release the adamantium bonds that shackled Tenjin. As the inquisitor

shifted, Tenjin caught a glimpse of the strange Deathwatch librarian behind him.

Tenjin looked confused, spitting a mouthful of blood onto the ground as he struggled to sit up. His injuries were severe and even this slight movement racked him with pain. Without his armour, he felt weak and exposed. 'Then, you believe me, inquisitor?' The chaplain was suspicious and incredulous.

'It doesn't matter whether you are right. It doesn't even matter whether I believe you. What matters is that you believe yourself, and that I believe that.'

'Does the Inquisition not care what I have done?'

'The Inquisition is more interested in why you have done it, brother chaplain. Your purity and honour are our concerns – your actions are your own. As I said, only the Emperor can judge those.'

'I have been true to myself,' insisted Tenjin, reassuring himself and the inquisitor all at once.

The inquisitor and the librarian exchanged glances. 'Yes, that is clear to me now. What may not be clear to you is that you have also done a service to the Inquisition.'

Tenjin tilted his head and looked quizzically at the inquisitor. 'No, that is not clear to me. My service was to the Emperor and Sanguinius.'

'Indeed. But it is also the case that I have been surveying the behaviour of your former high priest for some time. I was suspicious of his affection for the mutant tribesmen of Baalus Trine, suspicious enough to enlist the aid of Ashok as he returned from his term of service with the Deathwatch.'

Tenjin's eyes fell on the shadowy figure behind the inquisitor – the same one who had stood at the shoulder of Ansatsu three months before. He was the same Marine who had stood beside the inquisitor outside the temple, when Tenjin had finally been brought to the ground. And Tenjin was sure that he had seen him before – long ago. What role did this librarian serve?

'Ansatsu trusted Ashok, evidently believing that the Thirst of the Death Company could not really be mastered, and suspecting that he had been tainted by his years of exposure to the forces of Chaos in the Deathwatch – our librarian did not seek to disillusion him. Ashok reported on the "tastes" of the high priest – the blood rites in which he participated, drinking the blood of the Baalite

cultists and their mutant victims. For the Inquisition this demonstrated that he was tainted already, perhaps a legacy of his years as a tribesman himself. For Ashok, however, a librarian of the Angels Sanguine, the fear was that this blood drinking would transform Ansatsu into a devoted follower of Khorne, as his omophagae organ internalised the cravings of the cultists whose blood he consumed. Ashok told me that Ansatsu's thoughts betrayed a plan to transform the Angels Sanguine, but he could discern no details. For a long time he suspected that you were part of that plan.

'The Inquisition was also not ignorant of the increasing Thirst of the neophytes and the younger Marines,' continued Addiss, 'and I was suspicious that this was some part of Ansatsu's plan, but we could not work out how Ansatsu might control this. Your explanation of the function of the Grail of Angels is compelling in this regard.'

Tenjin was wide-eyed. 'When did you know that I was not part of this?'

'Not until now. Ashok began to doubt your complicity when Ansatsu removed you from the Death Company, letting it rampage uncontrollably around the frontier, shedding immeasurable oceans of blood in which the high priest seemed to delight. But the actions of the scout squad under your command made him suspicious again – perhaps you were the agent of their corruption? However, Ansatsu was shocked and delighted by the slaughter those scouts unleashed. His plan was beginning to take shape. Now, it seems to us, he had the perfect excuse to remove you from the scene – his veteran chaplain, the most experienced Angel in the arts of controlling exactly what he wanted to release.

'Your bloody confrontation with the high priest was ambiguous for us. It was possible that it was the result of your own flaws, that you had succumbed to the Thirst and that you were lashing out against your own battle bothers. There was Rage in your eyes when we found you outside the temple, and we could not take any chances.'

'Hence the Tablet of Lestrallio.'

'Exactly so. We had to be sure that you had acted out of honour and faith in the Emperor and Sanguinius, not out of a blind thirst for blood. It doesn't matter whether your theory about the Grail of Angels is correct – Ansatsu was corrupt and your motives were pure...'

The inquisitor trailed off, distracted by the movements of Ashok behind him. The librarian had dropped to his knees, sweeping his cloak into a whirl as he bowed his head and gripped his fist to his chest.

Tenjin had also seen the flamboyant deference of the veteran librarian, and understanding began to seep into his mind as though carried in his blood. He swung his legs over the side of the tablet and pushed himself painfully to his feet – the imperatives of dignity.

Addiss shifted his eyes from Tenjin to Ashok, his incomprehension gradually turning to suspicion as he saw the eyes of the two Angels Sanguine fix on each other, sharing an unspoken understanding. The inquisitor narrowed his eyes and calculated silently, sandwiched into this moment of recognition without sharing it. He had never trusted librarians, with their psychic hoods and force staffs. They reeked of warp-taint. He could taste them in the air, and they made him nauseous.

And then there were the Angels Sanguine: Addiss had been within an eldar's blade width of requesting an Adepta Sororitas retinue for his visit to Baalus Trine. How mutated did they have to be before they became heretics – living offences to their armour and their gene-seed? He had only changed his mind when he realised that such a request would have handed authority over to the Ecclesiarchy on a platter. Emperor knows that there is no love lost between the Ecclesiarchy and the chaplains of the Blood Angels. Addiss was not about to let go of this mission.

Clarity began to filter through his confusion, and Addiss began to understand the impromptu ceremony being enacted around him. The pieces were falling into place. With Ansatsu gone, the veteran chaplain Tenjin had become the most senior figure in the Angels Sanguine – he would automatically accede to the position of high priest.

He watched the chaplain and the librarian as their eyes flashed in concentration, and he wondered what they would do now. How would they render these events into silence? How could they explain the loss of so many of their Chapter, including their high priest – especially with their numbers so low already? Would the Ordo Hereticus be interested in these explanations?

An unwelcome thought forced its way into Addiss's mind, pushing his pontifications aside and stamping its presence into his consciousness.

This is how we guarantee silence.

The inquisitor jolted out of his reverie and turned on his heel. The face of the librarian was deathly white and his eyes burned with a blinding red, piercing Addiss's soul and holding his body immobile.

'You will tell no one of this, brother inquisitor.'

Addiss could feel his oesophagus contracting, squeezing his breath out into the cold air of the apothecarion. He opened his mouth to protest, to demand that Ashok release him, to force him to remember the battles they had fought together over the last decades, but no words came out. He grasped at his throat in a futile attempt to tear away the invisible hands that strangled him.

Struggling against the librarian's restraints, Addiss turned to the face of Tenjin, letting his eyes reach out for some mercy from the new high priest. He found nothing but blood in those eyes, and he watched in horror as Tenjin performed a crisp cutting signal with his hand.

'For Sanguinius and the Emperor,' said Tenjin with clinical calm.

Ashok's eyes flared even brighter and Addiss spun involuntarily to face him, his feet hardly touching the floor. He tried to look away, but Ashok held his gaze immovably.

The thoughts seemed to form somewhere down near his stomach, swelling and pushing their way up through his abdomen: 'For Sanguinius and the Emperor, death comes for you.' The words bubbled through his blood, rushing through his jugular, flooding his brain with fatal certainty. 'Death comes for you. Death comes. It is here.'

At the very end of his life, Addiss saw the world in glorious red-shift, a spectrum of crimsons, scarlets, and rubies. The capillaries in his eyes ruptured in their thousands as the blood in his head quested for a vent – creating new escape routes for the building pressure.

As the inquisitor lay dead, blood oozing freely from his eyes into a slow flood around his prone body, Tenjin nodded his approval to Ashok. 'For Sanguinius,' they said together.

'Take the Second Company and deal with the remnants of his retinue,' said Tenjin with calm certainty. 'None must be allowed to leave this place.'

Ashok nodded his assent. Sliding his hood over his head, the Angels Sanguine librarian swept out of the Apothecarion, his force staff crackling in his hand. ♣

A STORM RISING

By Nick Kyme



THE TOWN OF Svedska burned. By the final rays of a bitter winter sun, Staniche watched the town in which he was born razed to the ground like kindling.

'Everyone is out,' Kreggar bellowed at him against the rising din of the battle. A gash over his forehead poured blood into the rings beneath his eyes before settling in the ragged blond beard that belied his youth. He wore the half-armour of the Gryphon Legion and brandished an ornate cavalry sabre in his left hand.

'The women and children?' Staniche asked. His face and neck were flecked with the blood of the enemy and he wiped a hand over the worst of it, smearing it over his skin and black beard. He wore the red rag symbol of a militia conscript but looked like he was born to fight; he carried his sword with practiced ease.

'They ride on ahead in the wagons, all that we could muster,' Kreggar said, squinting against the fiery horizon.

'Then let's join them, before the Kurgan filth have our heads. There's nothing left here.'

Svedska was dying. The Kurgan horde had fallen upon their once quiet hamlet without warning and laid waste to all. Many feared this was merely the beginning. The beginning of what, Staniche dared not wonder.

'This road leads us to Praag. Perhaps its walls can staunch this unholy tide,' Kreggar said, gazing into the distance. 'The victories of the old days seem long passed,' he muttered.

'They are dead, Kreggar, beyond our recall,' Staniche said.

'Kurgan!' a kossak cried from further back down the track.

A pack of snarling hounds and their masters had broken away from the horde that was pursuing them. They raced at the Kislev survivors with terrible vigour and within moments were upon them.

The kossack who had cried out the warning was torn apart, his sword flailing as the Kislevites met the Kurgan dogs head on. Staniche charged in, beheading one of the beasts. He slashed another down the flank and took an ear off a third as they snarled and snapped about him.

Goaded by their leash masters, another man was dragged down screaming as two hounds savaged him. Kreggar leapt towards the flailing mass of flesh, teeth and fur, plunging his sabre deep into the belly of a beast. It snarled and champed as it died.

Another lunged at Staniche with slaving intent. He caught its snarling charge in mid-air, holding its mouth shut in a powerful grip before impaling the creature with his sword. The blade snagged, caught between the monster's ribs.

A battle-cry rang through the chaos. A brutish, tattooed Kurgan ran towards him, wielding a barbed whip.

Staniche couldn't get his weapon free.

Silver flickered in the dark. The Kurgan shook and pitched forward with an arrow through his neck. The will of the chasing pack broke and they fled back to their masters.

'Move!' an Ungol rider cried from his horse.

The warriors took heed and ran. Before long they had forged a gap between themselves and the enemy as the chaos warriors gleefully tore down their home. With a grudging gratitude they escaped Svedska and became lost in the growing dark.



'MY THANKS TO you Yuri,' Staniche said quietly, horse trotting across the open steppe. An hour had passed since their escape from the battlefield and night had fallen.

'For what?' Yuri was an Ungol, a tribe of horse masters native to Kislev. He was bald except for a long top-knot of black hair and daubed with tattoos. He looked feral and untamed.

'For the arrow that saved my life.'

'Worse things than death,' Yuri said. 'Look behind you.'

The baggage train lumbered in their wake, carrying the wounded and their meagre supplies. It seemed like a vast and endless train. Never before had Staniche seen such

misery first hand and on such a scale. Men, women and children trudged beside the carts and wagons. Staniche had to look away. It was doubtful that many of them would last the night. If their wounds did not kill them then there was always the cold.

'We are making camp,' Kreggar announced bleakly as he rode up alongside them.

Yuri nodded and rode off to find a suitable site. Kreggar slumped wearily in the saddle.

'Everything all right?' Staniche asked, watching Yuri become a distant shadow on the horizon.

'How am I to deliver these people, Staniche? I fear we will not make it to Praag.' He gestured behind him to the refugees. An entire town's population homeless and with nought but a slim hope. So many of them, drawn into a thin and snaking column for their own protection. Outriders flanked the caravan riding warhorses on either side and to the rear of the column. Even they looked weary and cold.

'What happened?' he said.

'I don't know Kreggar, but this battle is only the start of it, I fear,' Staniche stated simply, steel in his eyes. 'We must make preparations.' Turning his steed, he and Kreggar rode back to the caravan.



IS THIS IT?' Staniche asked, waving his hand over the supplies that had been collected.

'It was all that could be salvaged from Svedska,' Kreggar said grimly.

Staniche's expression grew dark. Their problems were mounting.

Troubled, Kreggar turned to two warriors.

'Ration the food,' he told them, mustering his authority. 'Divide it equally, leave no one without.'

They nodded and set about their orders.

Nodding to Staniche, Kreggar went off to oversee the rationing.

Staniche couldn't look at their worn faces any longer. Kislevites were used to hardship – they had battled the archenemy for many years and knew the perils – but their home was gone and cold gnawed at them. He knew their resolve hung by a thread.

He turned away as a hand grasped his arm.

'A word?' a voice rasped.

A hunched man, with a thick moustache, stooped before him. Another man, taller and wiry, lingered behind.

Staniche eyed them suspiciously.

'Speak,' Staniche growled.

'I am Vathek, and this is my associate, Blutin,' he began, gesturing to the man behind him.

'What of it?' Staniche asked curtly.

Vathek's breath, evaporating in the air, was sickly sweet and the oily grease upon the side clumps of tatty hair on his head shone in the light of the overhead moon.

Staniche felt his revulsion toward the man grow.

'Captain Staniche, isn't it?' Vathek ventured.

'My name is Staniche. What do you want?'

'Ah, yes,' Vathek said, making a hissing sound through his teeth. He drew closer to Staniche and his voice became a conspiratorial whisper.

'Look around,' he said, 'most of these people will not last the night, let alone reach Praag.'

Staniche raised his eyebrow.

'Clearly you have influence,' Vathek continued, nodding towards Kreggar. 'We should leave them behind, those that will not survive.'

Staniche reddened with anger and clenched his fists. Sensing hostility, Vathek raised his hands.

'They slow our escape. They would not want us to die because of them,' he began. 'A hard decision, but they are as good as dead. We should conserve our food for the strong and healthy.'

Staniche took a step towards the man.

'Listen to me,' Staniche muttered darkly, hoisting Vathek up by the scruff of his neck.

Blutin stepped forward, but caught the look in Staniche's eyes. He backed off.

'I warn you, never speak to me again, or address me as captain,' Staniche said, throwing the man down.

Vathek scrambled to his feet, choking as he retreated.

'You'd best watch that temper of yours,' he spat, 'I know you, I know why you are no longer a captain,' he warned. 'They all know,' he added darkly, gesturing to a small crowd that had gathered to witness the assault.

Staniche saw contempt in their eyes. Ashamed, he turned away and stalked off into the night.



HE LAY IN his bedroll, looking up at a starless and uncaring sky. Only two hours had passed. The camp was organised and the watch set. Mercifully, it was quiet and still, with only a faint breeze kicking up swirls of laden snow. Despite the chill, Staniche couldn't feel the cold. Past memories dominated his senses. Exhausted from battle he drifted into a fitful sleep...

Time slowed as the great gout of blood spurted from the Boyar's mouth as the arrow ran through his neck.

He could smell the blood.

A kossak was blinded by it and a Kurgan horseman skewered him through the back.

He saw the pain on the kossack's face as he watched him die.

The kossack convulsed, his heart impaled, and lurched forward, careening into another warrior. Their ranks broke apart and the enemy fell upon them, slaughtering them all.

He heard the screams ring in his ears. They deafened him.

Across the battlefield Kislevites fell and died. The cause was lost and the enemy unrelenting.

Sweat and blood of a battle lost was a bitter taste in his mouth.

Friends and relatives, people he had known all his life screamed and died, a chilling chorus to an opera of slaughter.

Rampant flames enveloped the entire line as all he had known was scorched from existence.

He felt the heat of the blaze sear his flesh and screamed as it consumed him...



STANICHE AWOKE. He sat bolt upright, breathing in ragged gasps, feverish sweat evaporating off his body through sodden clothes. He sprang from his bedroll, stripped down to his under leggings, and put on fresh clothes from a pack nearby.

He ran his hand through his hair and tied it into a ponytail.

How long had he slept? An hour? Two?

For a moment he dared believe it had all been a dream, that Svedska still stood, that the burden of over a hundred people didn't weigh on his shoulders.

But there it was, waiting for him, the refugee masses and a long train of wagons that littered the otherwise barren oblast.

The camp was dormant. The terrible stillness of the night was a chance for fears and doubts to manifest and grow. Staniche hadn't realised how many people had been driven from Svedska.

They huddled around pitiful fires, clutching tins of broth. Shivering children cowered in threadbare blankets, their mothers and fathers either dead or too weak to care. An old man coughed in his sleep. Their hopes were fading, they existed merely for the horde to take them or the cold to deliver them.

Staniche felt his resolve ebbing away as he strapped on his weapons belt, dragged on a thick, woollen coat and wandered away into the dark.

Fifty horse strides from the camp, someone crouched upon a snow-kissed rise. Staniche reached for his sword, fearing it was a Kurgan scout, then realised it was Yuri.

'Look,' the Ungol said without turning, as Staniche reached him.

Staniche obeyed, following his gaze.

A sea of blackness confronted him. North, there was the wan glow of Svedska as the fires still burned. Closing his eyes to it, he pulled his gaze away.

'I see nothing,' Staniche muttered.

'We Ungol watch our borders for many years. Sight grew long in that time,' said Yuri. 'Something hunts us from the west.'

Slightly alarmed, Staniche looked again, his eyes adjusting from the lambent glow of the recent firelight. There was nothing – then he saw it, a rider on horseback, scouring the plains.

'Kurgan?' asked Staniche, squinting.

'It is possible,' Yuri said.

'Is this the first you've seen?'

'So far.'

'I have to warn Kreggar,' Staniche told him.

'Take Brushkarr,' Yuri offered. 'I will watch and catch you up.'

Staniche nodded his gratitude, mounted the Ungol's horse and sped toward the camp. He felt a chill at his back, but it was not just the cold that froze him.



STANICHE RODE through the camp quickly, kicking up snow, waking dozens of refugees as he raced past them, urging Brushkarr on with firm commands. A corona of light loomed ahead, seemingly suspended in air. As he drew closer he realised it was the glow from a lantern. A militia fighter held it aloft, shivering against the cold. He stood outside the large leather supply tent.

Staniche dismounted.

'Have you seen Kreggar?' he asked.

'I am here,' a voice replied from within the tent. Kreggar emerged from the gloom brandishing an empty straw sack. It had been crudely slashed open.

Kreggar's face was grim.

'We have a thief in the camp,' he said. 'Miles from Praag and our people steal from their own.'

'I bring worse news,' Staniche said. 'Yuri has spotted a Kurgan rider to the west, seeking our camp.'

'Damn it,' Kreggar spat, dropping the sack and rubbing his chin with a quivering hand. 'I had hoped we'd eluded them.'

'So had I, but they are not easily deceived. They will finish what they started at Svedska.'

'Then we gather up everyone and ride hard towards Praag. We must get some distance between us and the foe,' Kreggar said, sending a runner away to waken the men.

Staniche nodded. 'Yuri watches the western ridge. We'll meet up with him as we ride out,' he told Kreggar as he mounted up.

'I will rally the men at the northernmost wagons and have them rouse the people there,' Kreggar said, jogging alongside Staniche as he goaded Brushkarr forward.

'Very well,' Staniche replied, peeling away. 'I will take the southern wagons and do the same.'

Kreggar nodded grimly and raced away into the darkness, sword belt clanking against his armour. Staniche rode off towards the wagons, dread growing within him. It was as if an hourglass had been suddenly turned and all the grains of their existence were trickling inexorably away.



AMIDST COPIOUS protestation and desperate pleading, the people gathered up their meagre food and belongings to resume the hard trek across the oblast. Staniche blanked them all. He could not afford to be emotionally involved with these people. Were it up to them they would have waited there for their doom. His conscience would not allow that.

Four wagons had been sent to join the throng of northern wagons already; a cavalcade of sickness and blighted spirits. They badly needed rest and it was with a heavy heart that Staniche approached the last wagon.

An eerie quiet washed across the steppe. Inside the wagon all was still. An empty pan lay next to the remains of a pitiable fire, meagre wood chips blackened and cracked inside a small ring of stones. A tin kettle hung above it on an iron spit.

Staniche touched the kettle tentatively.

It was still warm.

The majority of the wagons had reached the assembling group over the rise.

He was alone.

'Ho there!' he called.

Silence greeted him.

'Awake, we are breaking camp,' he called again.

Staniche was barely five strides from the mouth of the wagon.

There was only darkness within and no answer came.

Staniche drew his sword quietly and crept up onto the wagon platform. He eased the door flap aside with his blade. A lantern glinted within but it was turned low and little light invaded the gloom. Half-dark pervaded the rest of the interior but someone lingered at the back, unmoving.

'Show yourself!' Staniche said, brandishing his sword before him.

He turned the lantern up. It hissed and blazed brightly. Amber light washed over the inside of the wagon.

'Teeth of Ursun,' Staniche gasped. His sword hit the floor with a clatter.

Blood stained the leather flanks of the wagon's interior. It carpeted the floor, seeping into the cracks like a contagion. An abattoir stench clung to the air. Staniche gagged. Two bodies lay slumped against the back wall mutilated beyond recognition with their throats torn out. He bolted out of the wagon and was sick in the snow. It looked like the work of savage dogs.



STANICHE RACED amongst the hastily assembled wagons, people spilling aside at his approach.

Gasping, he found Kreggar at the centre of the mass, waving on the first of the wagons, a pair of lancers leading the group.

'Hasten those wagons!' Staniche told him urgently, reigning Brushkarr in and leaning in to Kreggar's ear.

Staniche's arrival was followed by worried mutterings. Panic gnawed at the refugees and the situation threatened to become anarchic as many wanted to leave and find their own way to Praag.

Staniche took Kreggar to one side, behind one of the wagons and away from the throng of people.

'I've found two dead in a wagon on the southern perimeter,' he said in a breathless whisper. 'Their throats have been torn out.'

'There were three more in the northern wagons,' Kreggar muttered back. 'What could have done this? Kurgan dogs?'

'Maybe, but why didn't we see them or hear something?'

'They were picking off stragglers, trying to sow fear in our ranks,' Kreggar said. 'It won't take much for the people to break, and if that happens...'

'We'd all be food for the dogs,' Staniche finished for him.

'The people are terrified. They know something is amiss,' Kreggar hissed, flashing a glance at the milling refugees who returned his gaze, fear and suspicion in their eyes.

Staniche saw them too. To drive them on like this could kill the weak and sickly. He couldn't save them all. It was just a matter of simple numbers now.

'We have lingered here long enough,' Staniche told him. 'We ride, and we ride hard.'



THEY HAD ONLY been on the road for an hour when they heard cries from ahead.

The refugee train stalled. People milled about in the darkness, unsure where to turn. Some tried to flee into the wilds until

Kreggar sent men to stop them and restore order. They were rapidly losing faith in his ability to protect them.

Yuri, at the head of the column, signalled them to stop.

There was more fearful muttering and the people drew in tight to the wagons, clinging to what was left of their shattered nerves.

Staniche, who had just reigned in two deserters from the first wagon, galloped hard to reach the scout quickly.

'It is a stagecoach,' Yuri said once Staniche was in earshot.

Staniche looked ahead and saw it. There were purple satin drapes over the windows and gold embossed filigree wound around an Imperial crest. The horses were dead. On a carpet of corpses two hooded warriors fought desperately against ten Kurgan marauders.

Staniche turned in the saddle and pointed to two lancers riding at the head of the column.

'You two, with me,' he bellowed and raced off towards the fight.

As Staniche charged toward the battle an arrow flitted past him, and the death screams of a Kurgan marauder split the air as Yuri found his mark.

It got their attention and three of the barbarians ran towards him, yelling to their gods, blood stained axes raised.

Staniche raced amongst them, intent on reaching the coach. He beheaded the first and the second fell to a splintering lance blow as the Winged lancers from the front of the column joined him.

Three more Kurgan broke away from the main group that were attacking the strangers.

Upon seeing the Kislevites and the bodies of their brethren, they fled. The rest followed after, scurrying to mount their steeds and race away from the fight, circling around the refugee wagons and heading north.

'Scouts,' Staniche gasped, before sending the lancers back to the column.

'Are you alright?' he called to the hooded warriors who walked up to meet him.

'We are now,' one of them said, drawing back the thick black hood.

Staniche gasped.

It was a woman.

She was beautiful, with raven hair and green eyes. Dressed like an Imperial noblewoman, she looked powerful and confident.

'Milady,' Staniche whispered, bowing slightly as their eyes met.



A GROUP OF REFUGEES had gathered around the two strangers.

'Silk-swaddled Empire curs,'

Vathek muttered. Blutin nodded mutely in agreement beside him.

The arrival of the Imperials had caused a stir in the Kislevite camp. Two more bodies meant two more mouths to feed, and then there was the fact that the female was of noble descent.

'We should have left them to their fate,' he spat derisively. 'Where was the Empire when Svedska burned, eh?'

There was muttered agreement in the crowd.

The lady's companion, a tall man, pale and severe, stood before her protectively, and looked at the Kislevites threateningly.

Staniche forced his way through the crowd, ignoring the suspicious whispers.

'Please, follow me,' he said to the strangers.

Staniche led them through the crowd of refugees to a tent.

Within, Kreggar waited at a small table.

'May I present Lady Halstein,' Staniche said.

Lady Halstein nodded a greeting to Kreggar who reciprocated the gesture.

'Sir, you have our eternal gratitude,' she began. 'I believe the actions of your men may have saved our lives.'

Staniche stood silent throughout the exchange and couldn't help noticing that Lady Halstein's companion, who stood in the shadows behind his mistress, looked anything but grateful.

'Forgive my frankness,' said Kreggar, 'but who are you and what are you doing so far from the Empire?'

'We are part of a political envoy sent from Talabheim and headed for Praag to discuss the growing threat of the Kurgan hordes to the north,' she explained. 'It seems our mission is quite timely.'

'I beg your pardon, milady, but are you saying these barbarians are merely part of a larger force?' Staniche interceded.

She turned to face him.

'Yes, I'm afraid war is coming. With each victory they gather more forces to their banner.'

'We too are headed for Praag,' Staniche said. 'Our town of Svedska was put to the torch by Kurgan filth and we are in need of solace.' He realised he was staring at Lady Halstein and looked away.

'I'll be honest with you,' Lady Halstein said, turning back to Kreggar, 'Kurn and I, she indicated her companion, who still hadn't moved and whose face was still fixed with the same saturnine expression, 'are in need of protection. It is imperative that we reach Praag. I beseech you, allow us to accompany you.'



THEY HAD TRAVELLED through the night. Impressed by the urgency of their mission, Kreggar had immediately agreed to the Imperial nobles accompanying them. As soon as they had recovered what provisions were aboard the stagecoach they had moved on. The band that had ambushed Lady Halstein's coach were a scout party who had overshot the refugee train, but now the Kurgan knew their route and all haste had to be made.

The new dawn came late and was tinged with grey. Dark clouds blossomed across the sky. It was a threatening vista and an ill omen, draining away the light of a cold and cheerless morning.

The refugees struggled onward through thick snow, battling drifts, chilled to the bone and ever fearful of attack. An atmosphere of finality pervaded, sapping the will of the hardest warrior, turning his resolve to ash. The people were becoming like cattle, in need of constant herding and a divide had manifested between them and their protectors. Only Yuri seemed unaffected by the dire mood. He was as solitary and taciturn as ever.

Staniche rode up to meet him at the head of the column.

'Any sign?' he asked quietly.

'No, but something bothers me,' he admitted. 'The horseman we spotted last night rode upon the western ridge, yet the Kurgan attacked from the north.'

'Perhaps he rode around and rejoined the warband later?' Staniche suggested.

'Perhaps,' Yuri conceded.

Lady Halstein rode up alongside them.

'Good morning, sirs,' she said.

Staniche smiled back, his heart beating harder.

'Little good about it,' Yuri remarked phlegmatically. 'I will ride ahead. The Kurgan will attack again, and soon,' he promised.

Lady Halstein rode in silence for a moment as Yuri went off into the distance. 'Am I not welcome company?'

'Don't let Yuri offend you, milady,' Staniche assured her. 'I've known him for years. It is merely his way.'

'You fought together?' she asked.

'Yes,' Staniche muttered, his good mood abruptly quashed, 'in the army of Kislev.'

'You are no longer a soldier?'

'No,' he answered curtly. Unwanted memories flooded back to darken his mood.

'I'm sorry,' Lady Halstein said quickly. 'It wasn't my intention to upset you.'

'You haven't. It is I who should apologise, milady,' Staniche countered, eager to smooth things over.

'My name is Adrianna,' she said demurely.

'Staniche,' he reciprocated, and smiled.

'A noble name,' she said. 'Tell me, Staniche, do you believe we will reach Praag?'

'It is within my power, I will get you there,' he said.



NIGHT BEGAN TO smother day as the refugee train ground to a weary halt.

After camp had been set up, Adrianna retired early to her tent an hour before nightfall. Kurn stood across the entrance like a statue, brooding and dark. He declined all offers of a place by the fireside and dutifully waited in the gloom, his hand upon the hilt of his long sword.

'The supplies are dwindling,' Kreggar told Staniche as they sat by the crackling fire.

'More thefts?' he asked, eyes wandering over to Kurn.

'Some,' Kreggar said. 'I am at a loss as to how to prevent it. Spread over such a wide area, I simply don't have the manpower,' he sighed.

'What are you looking at?' Kreggar asked suddenly, noticing Staniche's distraction. Kreggar followed his gaze.

'Ah, he is a sour one,' he remarked.

'He seldom leaves her side. Do you think they are lovers?' Staniche asked.

'I don't know. Is it of interest to you?' Kreggar goaded with a wry smile.

'Of course not,' Staniche replied. 'She is a lady and I... I am a disgrace.'

'It's in the past, Staniche, long forgotten,' Kreggar said quietly.

'Not by me.' Staniche got up and wandered off.

Kreggar was about to stop him when one of his men approached.

'Sir,' he said breathlessly, 'more bad news.'



STANICHE SAT ALONE, away from the fire. The night was dark and mirrored his thoughts.

He did not envy Kreggar, organising such a large group of people was nightmarish, yet he too had his part. They had to reach Praag soon. The people were losing faith, and once that was gone there would be chaos. Thirty soldiers against over a hundred desperate men and women. It didn't bear thinking about. Hard enough to face the minions of the arch-enemy but when your own people rebelled from within... Staniche had his suspicions about the thieves but found he was quickly losing interest. The ghosts of his past haunted him and would not let him be.

'I, too, have my daemons,' a voice said behind him.

Adrianna sat down next to him.

'I have fought mine a long time,' Staniche responded.

'I would speak with you, if you'll allow it?' she asked demurely.

'Of course,' Staniche obliged, grateful for her company. 'If it would not annoy your husband,' he added, venturing a gaze at Adrianna's ever-watchful, dark companion nearby.

'Oh no,' she cried, laughing out loud. 'He is not my husband. He is my guardian. We are related, that much is true, but our bond is one of blood, not marriage.'

'I'm sorry, I meant no offence.'

'None taken,' she said smoothly. 'Now, let us talk of me no longer. I want to know about you. Tell me,' she said, 'about your daemons.'

Looking deep into her eyes, Staniche felt compelled to open his heart. He could not resist.

'It's true, I was a soldier once, a captain of the Gryphon Legion. But I killed the officer in charge of my company. I was branded a murderer and dishonourably discharged,' he said simply.

Staniche turned to her, anger and shame in his eyes.

'He was a cruel man, sending men to their deaths on the whim of his dire battlefield tactics. I lost over half my men to such a whim. When I confronted him,

he laughed in my face and scoffed that the whore-son dogs of Kislev were little better than fodder. I didn't hesitate.' Staniche closed his eyes at the memory. 'I killed him where he stood,' he whispered, all the anger and hatred evaporating from his expression as he opened his eyes again. 'I was lucky to be spared the block.'

Silence descended. Adrianna reached out and held Staniche's hand.

'Don't be ashamed,' she told him. 'There are worse things. You may have died yourself and the officer would have gone on sacrificing wantonly.' She looked deeply into Staniche's eyes. 'I know pain,' she said, her voice quivering slightly. 'My family were killed by a monster, all of them, save Kurn and I, slain in cold blood. It was years ago but still I yearn for vengeance.' Adrianna was about to go on but realised her emotions were getting the better of her. 'You survived, Staniche, there is no shame in that,' she said. 'We must all try to survive.'

'Thank you,' Staniche said, gripping her hand.

'For what?' she asked.

'Your kind words.'

'We have known each other but for a brief time and yet I know you are a brave and honourable man. They are the qualities you will be judged by, they are the qualities by which I judge you,' she whispered softly.

Staniche felt his skin tingle. He had known women in his life, and there had even been love, but this one was truly captivating and held an inner strength and regard that beguiled him.

'You must be cold, away from the fire,' he told her, heart racing. 'I think...' he faltered.

Adrianna stared at him and whispered, 'I am not cold.'

'Staniche,' a voice interrupted.

Staniche and Adrianna shrank away from each other.

It was Yuri. If he felt embarrassed at invading their intimacy he did not show it.

'Something on the road. Follow me,' he said and turned away into the dark.

'I... I'm sorry,' Staniche began, 'I must go.' He turned quickly, his head swimming, and raced gratefully into the freezing night.



YURI WAITED BY a desolate embankment, thick with overgrown scrub.

'There,' he said.

The embankment descended into a steep, sloping crag as Staniche looked over the edge to where Yuri pointed. His boots sent scattered scree cascading into the gloom below. Thick brush hindered his view. Staniche ventured downward, crouching low to arrest his descent, sword slapping at his hip. With some effort he reached the edge of the crag line and peered into a rocky valley.

'Boris Ursa's eyes!' he swore aloud, nearly losing his footing.

Yuri's strong arm steadied him.

Down in the valley, partly concealed by the dense brush, were the bodies of at least thirty men. They were Kurgan. Staniche felt sure these were the ones who had followed them from Svedska. All of them were dead, their throats torn out.

'Back to camp,' Staniche said with urgency.



WHEN STANICHE AND Yuri reached the camp, Adrianna was nowhere to be seen. Nor was there any sign of Kurn. Kreggar awaited them.

'Come with me,' he said quickly.

Such was the man's urgency and anxiety that Staniche didn't get a chance to tell him about the dead Kurgan in the valley.

Kreggar led them quickly to the camp's perimeter. A large tent was ahead, a stout-looking cart outside it. The tent was a

good twenty horse-strides from the main campsite.

'I have found our thieves,' he announced, ripping back a thick leather tarp covering the back of the cart. Beneath were all manner of provisions, blankets, trinkets and valuables looted from the ruins of Svedska.

Staniche didn't need Kreggar to tell him who the culprit was.

'Vathek.'

'Yes. I sent men to check all the tents and wagons. One alerted me and I found this,' he said.

'Kreggar, there is something...' Staniche began but Kreggar's held up a hand.

'When I looked within their tent to confront the thieves I found them,' he told them both, wrenching back the tent flap.

Vathek and Blutin lay within. They were torn open like ripe fruit, Blutin's face fixed in a grimacing scream that would never escape his lips, Vathek face down and clawing at the earth, as if in a vain effort to flee.

'Just like the others,' Kreggar said, closing the tent flap. 'Savaged by Kurgan dogs. A heavy price to pay.'

'These men were not killed by Kurgan,' Staniche told him. 'We found the corpses of the entire horde strewn about a valley off from the road ahead.'

'Gods, then who...' Kreggar began, his voice trailing off as he looked back to the camp.

Screams rent the night, emanating from the camp. The three men raced towards the horrible noise.



REACHING THE CORONA of light cast by the fire, Staniche saw him. Like a knight of old, crimson armour glinting like wet blood in the firelight, he waited upon a dire black steed for all to see.

He had heard of these creatures and now as he looked upon the daemonic visage of their predator, his armour

wrought with ancient bat wing and dragonsque devices, he realised that without doubt it was a vampire, a Blood Dragon, one of the most feared creatures in all of ancient myth, a dark character from a story to scare children at night made real.

The vampire's beast snorted impatiently and he uttered an oath in a tongue that Staniche did not recognise but brought with it the sense of ages.

Like red thunder he charged and brought down a hapless wave of warriors in a blur of rage and red thirst.

'Meet him!' Kreggar bellowed defiantly, driving warriors forward.

Men fell and died. The ferocity and skill of the monster was something to behold. Staniche wished it had been Kurgan that Yuri had spotted that night.

'I must find Adrianna,' he cried, gripped by a sudden panic.

'Who?' Kreggar asked, mounting up.

'The Lady Halstein,' Staniche said.

'Go then, and gather whoever else isn't dead to safety,' Kreggar ordered him, drawing his sabre.

'Ursun be with you,' Staniche said.

'And you.'

Kreggar rode off into the chaos. Yuri was gone too.

Staniche raced through the maddening throng of fleeing refugees. Their will had broken at last, he had failed them but he would salvage something from this disaster if he could. Thrusting people aside, he found Adrianna's tent and burst inside.

Kurn was within, blocking his path.

'Step aside,' Staniche demanded.

'The Lady Halstein is not to be disturbed,' he said without emotion.

'Aside, damn you, we are beset by a vampire!' Staniche shoved the warrior roughly aside and stalked into the tent.

Adrianna was behind him, knelt down over a young Kislevite girl.

'I am afraid it is worse than that,' she said, turning to face him.

She was pale, her eyes yellow and cat-like, infecting her with a cold and terrible beauty. She wiped a thin trickle of the girl's blood from her chin and bottom lip,

long fangs protruded from her gums.

'No,' Staniche gasped, before Kurn threw him from the tent.



DAZED, STANICHE LOOKED up and saw Kurn standing over him. Adrianna had vanished.

'Up,' he ordered, drawing his long sword.

Staniche rose to his feet. He drew his sword slowly and made ready.

In a blur of movement, Kurn attacked. Staniche was battered back as he struggled to fend off the fierce assault. He gave ground quickly, desperately trying to find space to launch a response, acutely aware of the chaos around him. A panicked refugee careened into the fight, utterly disorientated. Kurn pushed them aside, hissing maliciously, intent on his prey. This gave Staniche time to regroup and as Kurn swung at him with a high chopping blow, he parried, two-handed, and held him.

'Vampire cur,' Staniche spat between clenched teeth.

'I am more than that, Kislev dog,' Kurn retorted, 'I am her love!'

Staniche's heart fell, then he felt his anger rise. Roaring, he threw Kurn off, who tumbled back. Charging at the stunned warrior, Staniche smashed his defence aside with a swipe, the rage in his eyes infecting every sinew as the pain of two long years spilled out.

'You cannot have her!' Kurn cried and launched himself forward.

False devotion drove the two men and they were locked again, blades raking down each other, sparks leaping as they struck and chaffed. A sliver spat from the edge of Kurn's sword and bit into Staniche's left cheek. Grimacing, he pushed Kurn back, eye-to-eye with the puppet thing Adrianna had enslaved as her swain.

Kurn charged but his zeal had unbalanced him. As he brought all of his strength to bear in one huge strike, Staniche spun away, Kurn cutting air in his wake. Staniche dropped quickly to one knee and thrust his blade into Kurn's chest. It drove deep as Kurn lurched forward, his sword slipped from numb fingers, clattering to the ground as he was impaled. Disbelief was etched upon his face as he regarded his slayer. Staniche looked back, grim and impassive. He wrenched the sword from Kurn's ribcage, bringing out a long splatter of blood, then severed the man's head with one vicious blow. Kurn's body slumped to the ground, in curious unison with the fallen head. Staniche sagged with fatigue. But the fight was not over.

Kreggar and a handful of warriors battled furiously against the crimson armoured Blood Dragon. He had been unhorsed but was carving a bloody swathe around him with frightening martial discipline.

Staniche charged in to join them but found he had to defend himself quickly as he reached the circle of death. The vampire knight was preternaturally fast and skilled beyond any warrior Staniche had ever seen. He whirled his sword around him in a deadly figure-of-eight arc and where it fell, men died.

'Seven are dead already,' Kreggar gasped, retreating from the fighting to catch his breath. His sling was torn and his broken arm hung by his side. 'It is impossible.'

'Maybe not,' Staniche returned. He spied Yuri taking aim upon a high ridge that overlooked the fighting. 'We must make an opening for Yuri to shoot,' he said.

'We rush him,' Kreggar breathed, his eyes dark. Only now did Staniche see an ugly wound blossoming under his shirt.

Kreggar charged and three other warriors followed him. A lancer was cut down before he could strike, an uppercut slicing him open from groin to neck. A kossack took the full force of a sideways slash that cut his midriff from his legs. A lethal punch struck a third warrior's face

and his head snapped back with a sickening crunch of bone. Kreggar was the last.

He leapt straight at the monster. The Blood Dragon lunged forward and his ancient blade slipped into Kreggar's stomach and out the other side, but he held on and with his dying strength dragged the vampire's sword arm down, exposing his breastplate.

'Now, Yuri!' Staniche cried.

Yuri let loose and the arrow flew straight and true.

It snapped upon the vampire's ornate armour, doubtlessly steeled with dark sigils and runes.

Yuri gaped in horror, his last arrow spent.

The vampire knight turned to Staniche and hissed. Staniche took it as a challenge.

In the corner of his eye, Staniche saw Yuri scramble down from the ridge. He plucked a long dagger from his boot and threw it at the vampire. But the beast heard it and caught the dagger in mid-flight before casting it back into Yuri's stomach. The Ungol was pitched off his feet and fell to the earth, where he lay motionless.

'No!' Staniche cried. First Kreggar, now Yuri! Blinded by tears of rage he charged.

For a moment the vampire was taken aback by the sudden fury and gave ground, but he recovered quickly. Battering his sword aside, the Blood Dragon punched Staniche hard in the stomach. The Kislevite was hurled off his feet and sent sprawling in the dirt.

Staniche tried to rise but couldn't. His ribs were broken and he tasted blood in his mouth. He reached for his sword but it was gone, smashed from his grasp.

The vampire loomed over him. The creature raised its sword high, the blade glittered in the moonlight.

A cry prevented the death stroke. In his heart Staniche knew it was Adrianna.

The vampire lowered his sword and turned toward his new adversary.

Adrianna stood before him, her own blade unsheathed.

When she spoke it was in the menacing tongue of the vampires. Staniche heard it as if she were speaking directly to him, as a glimpse from her past formed in his mind. At once he realised, this was the monster she had told him had slain her kin. She had drawn him here, fooling him with easy meat, and now he was weakened she would kill him to exact her vengeance.

The Blood Dragon raised his sword in salute and Adrianna leapt forward, blade flashing in the dark.

Blood pulsing in his ears, Staniche's world grew dim and the clash of battle sounded like it was coming from underwater. The wound was worse than he thought. He tried to hold on, but blacked out.



COOL FINGERS CARESSED his cheek and, with the force of a hurricane, the world rushed back around him. Staniche opened his eyes and felt his pain anew. It throbbed angrily in his chest and, as he focused, saw Adrianna crouched over him.

Staniche recoiled, but pain flared, pinning him where he lay.

'The Blood Knight?' he gasped.

'Dust and ash,' she said.

'And now it is my turn,' he said through blood-flecked lips.

Adrianna smiled and stroked his hair.

'Perhaps not,' she said. 'I can give you immortality,' she promised, eyes sparkling.

'I would rather die,' Staniche said.

Adrianna got to her feet, and disappointment flashed briefly over her face.

'I could have you, Kislevite, if I willed it. You would succumb to me.'

'Then do so, wretch, but you will not enslave my soul. All we were was food to you and your kind.'

'You were more than that,' she said, leaning down to whisper in his ear. 'You were bait.' *

TALES FROM THE
TEN-TAILED CAT

THE TEN-TAILED CAT IN TALABHEIM, KNOWN
THROUGHOUT THE CITY AS A GATHERING PLACE
FOR RACONTEURS AND THE TELLERS OF TALL TALES.

THEY COME TO THE TEN-TAILED CAT FOR
MANY REASONS. SOME TO BOAST OF
THEIR EXPLOITS, SOME TO AMUSE AND
ENTERTAIN, OTHERS TO UNBURDEN THEIR
SOULS OR PASS ON DIRE WARNINGS...

YOU'RE ASKING
ME TO ILLUMINATE A BOOK ON A
CRACKPOT INVENTOR?

AND SOME JUST TO
SPEAK ILL OF THE DEAD.

NO, I'M
WRONG... A BARKING
LUNATIC!

ALEKSANDER
VON HELSING WAS NO MERE
INVENTOR - HE WAS A BONAFIDE
GENIUS!

AH, RIGHT.
THIS WOULD BE THE SAME GENIUS THAT
YOU SAID WAS BOOTED OUT OF THE ALTDORF
ENGINEERS' SCHOOL FOR BEING A
FRAUD, YES?

VON HELSING
WAS NO FRAUD,
FATHER. IN FACT HIS
WORK WAS THAT OF
A PIONEER!

PIONEER?
A SOW'S EAR MORE
LIKE! THESE INVENTIONS
YOU SPEAK OF BELONG IN
THE REALM OF THE
FAERIE FOLK.

B-B-BUT THERE
WAS THE SUIT OF IRON,
WHICH PROTECTED THE EMPIRE'S
FINEST FROM ARROWS AND
SMALL ARTILLERY
BARRAGES!

'YES, I HEARD THAT THE WEIGHT OF
IT WAS SO SLUGGISH THAT THE
SOLDIER WAS LEFT A SITTING
DUCK FOR CANNON FIRE.'

O-O-O-KAY,
BUT THEN, THERE WAS
THIS!



VON
Helsing's
MARVELLOUS
MACHINE OF
MIRACLES!

ON PAPER,
IT WAS A DEVICE THAT WOULD
CHANGE THE DESTINY OF MAN
FOREVER BY PROVIDING AN
ENERGY SOURCE THAT COULD
BE APPLIED IN COUNTLESS
PRACTICAL WAYS.

'BUT TO TAP INTO THIS ENERGY SOURCE,
ALEKSANDER HAD TO ALSO CONTEND WITH
THE... UM, UNPREDICTABLE CONSEQUENCES
OF PUSHING THE ALCHEMIST'S ENVELOPE.

'HE SPENT DECADES TRYING TO
COME UP WITH A FEASIBLE AND SAFE
POWER SOURCE FOR HIS MACHINE...
BUT ALWAYS HIT A BRICK WALL.



'AFTER ABANDONING THE EMPIRE, ALEKSANDER CONTINUED HIS
RESEARCH IN FAR-OFF TILEA WHERE HIS GROUNDBREAKING WORK
ATTRACTED THE UNWELCOME ATTENTION OF THE DUPLICITOUS
MIRAGIANO BORDER PRINCE, RICARDO BAROLO.'



I LIKE
YOUR WORK, VAN HELPING.
AND I WANT TO MAKE YOU AN
OFFER YOU WON'T WANT
TO REFUSE.

THE
NAME'S VON
Helsing.

I GIVE YOU
MORE MONEY
THAN YOU EVER NEED
IF YOU BUILD ME A
MIRACLE MACHINE
TO CONQUER
TRANTIO!



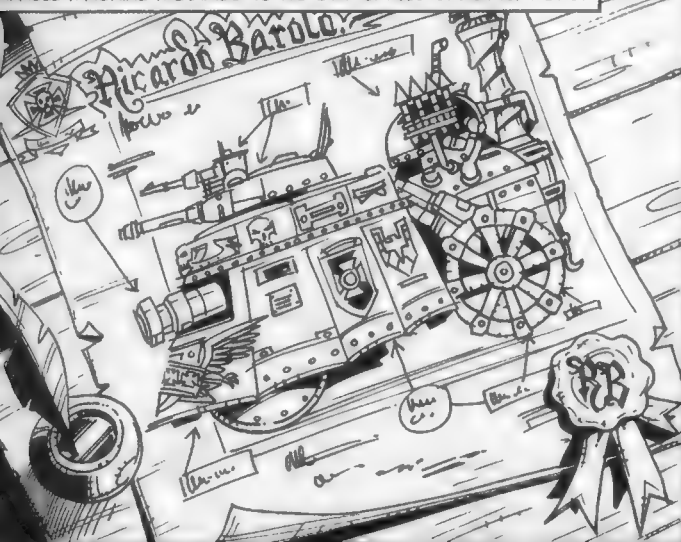
PAH! MY
MACHINE IS FOR THE BENEFIT
OF MANKIND, NOT TO HELP
YOU SLAUGHTER
IT!

I'D RATHER
DIE THAN SEE MY WORK
PERVERTED BY A TYRANT
LIKE YOU!

'BAROLO TOOK
ALEKSANDER AT
HIS WORD.'



HE TOOK THE ENGINEER'S RESEARCH AND, ALONG WITH STOLEN STEAM TANK BLUEPRINTS, TOOK IT TO HIS OWN SCIENTISTS, DEMANDING THAT THEY BUILD A VERSION OF VON HELSING'S MIRACLE MACHINE MODIFIED TO HIS OWN UNIQUE SPECIFICATIONS.



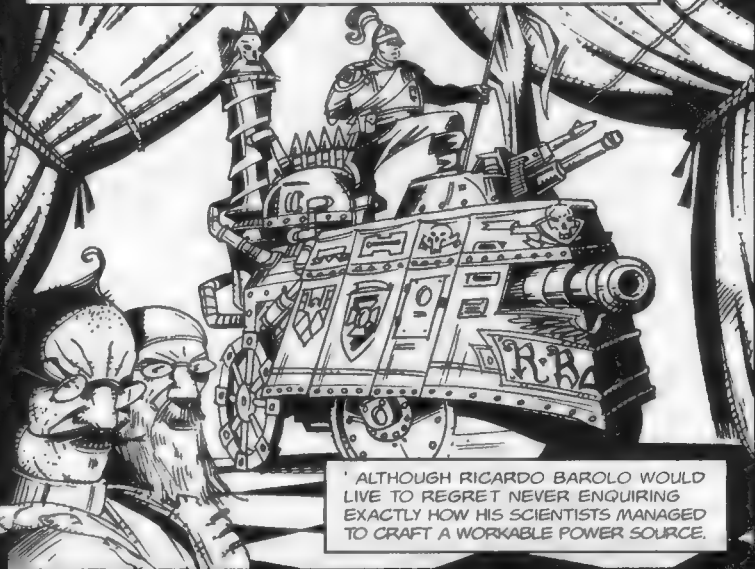
'BUT IN SPITE OF LIMITLESS FUNDS, BAROLO'S SCIENTISTS STILL HIT THE SAME STUMBLING BLOCK WHEN IT CAME TO FATHOMING THE CONUNDRUM OF THE MACHINE'S POWER SOURCE.



'AND SO IT WAS, LESS THAN A YEAR AFTER ALEKSANDER'S DEMISE, WORK ON THE MACHINE OF MIRACLES WAS COMPLETE.



'HOWEVER, THEY MIRACULOUSLY FOUND INSPIRATION THROUGH BAROLO'S POWERS OF PERSUASION.



'ALTHOUGH RICARDO BAROLO WOULD LIVE TO REGRET NEVER ENQUIRING EXACTLY HOW HIS SCIENTISTS MANAGED TO CRAFT A WORKABLE POWER SOURCE.



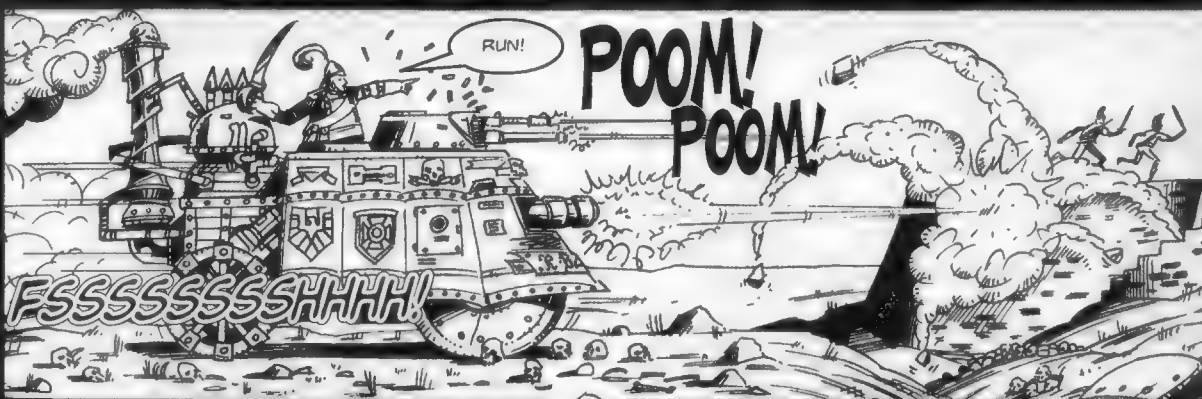
SHORTLY THEREAFTER, THE PRINCIPALITY OF TRANTIO FELL UNDER SEIGE FROM BAROLO'S ARMED FORCES.



'BAROLO WAITED UNTIL HIS NEIGHBOUR HAD BARELY MANAGED TO STAVE OFF HIS INITIAL DEPLOYMENT BEFORE HE MADE HIS ULTIMATE MOVE.'

YOU HEAR SOMETHING?

Rumble!



'BUT JUST WHEN VICTORY SEEMED TO BE IN BAROLO'S GRASP...'

EH? WHA'S WRONG WITH THE ENGINE?



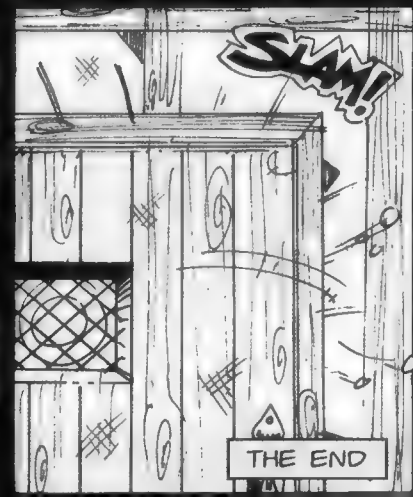
HAI-REEEEEE!



'THIS FOUL BEAST OF CHAOS WAS UNNATURALLY ATTUNED TO CHAOS, AND ABLE TO MANIPULATE THE FORCES THAT VON HELSING NEEDED TO POWER HIS MACHINE.'



'DRIVEN INSANE BY ITS INCARCERATION, AND WITH AN INSATIABLE APPETITE FOR VENGEANCE, THE BEAST TORE A HOLE IN THE VERY HEAVENS THEMSELVES...'





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Blood cries for Blood

BY JAMES PEATY

AS THE CHILL air whipped around the cabin of squad flyer nine-two-four, the pilot couldn't help but smile at how typical it was of life on Persana that something like this could happen on the coldest night of the year.

They'd been leaving the fortress, flying over a crowd that had assembled outside when, from below, someone had fired upon the flyer and shattered the rear shield.

The crowd had been massing nightly outside the imposing building over the last week, protesting at alleged Enforcer brutality in the city's Downside. That in itself made the pilot smile. How could you be anything other than brutal on the streets of the most degenerate slum this side of the Rhuric Nebula, especially with the threat of civil war looming?

But then that was Persana for you.

Not much made sense.

Clearing the Downside, flyer nine-two-four moved towards the power station at the city's southernmost point. Two officers were staking out the station and they needed a full sweep of the surrounding area before they could move in.

It was boring work, made worse by the added ventilation that chilled the pilot and his partner to their bones.

To pass the time they listened to the commercial band transmissions while their spot-lamps swiped around the base of the fossilised diamond that powered the city, fuelled the planet's economy and dominated the southern skyline.

'...spokesman said that no charges would be brought against Merden Jorsted. The Governor's aide is being held after allegations were made linking him to an off-world organised crime ring. The news adds further strain to the already tense

relations between the Governor's office and the Enforcers, who are in dispute because of the Governor's reluctance to call in Imperial Guard reinforcements to help deal with the southern secessionist threat...'

'Boring.'

The pilot spat a lump of phlegm out of the side window as he switched off the transmission. Usually his partner could deal with his dismissive attitude, but today it irritated him.

'Don't you ever take an interest in current affairs?'

The pilot snorted.

'As if I give a shi-'

The radio crackled back into life.

'Flyer nine-two-four, do you copy?'

The pilot flicked a switch above his head.

'This is flyer nine-two-four. We're in position over the power station.'

'Nine-two-four, get back to the fortress. We've got a full scale riot breaking out here and we need aerial support.'

The pilot turned and shared a look of exasperation with his partner.

'Confirmed, control, we're en route.'

As the flyer peeled round, the pilot looked into his aft monitor at the image of two small figures waiting near the south entrance.

'You're on your own now, boys.'



AS THE TAIL lights of the flyer receded into the distance, Enforcer Klimt shivered. The night air was bitter. The cold seemed to be burning him from within. To stave off the growing

discomfort he amped up the internal heat on his body glove. It didn't seem to make much difference.

He rubbed his arms and prayed they'd hurry up and get inside the power plant soon. Unfortunately, he knew they had to wait a while before making their entry.

Damn regulations.

Shifting in the saddle of his bike, he looked over at Yedas.

The older man seemed anxious. It was unlike him but, considering recent events, his distraction was understandable.

As usual, Yedas was railing against the regime of Governor Schaar.

'He knows I know he's dirty. That's why he wants me off of the street.'

Klimt was used to Yedas's rants, but in the last few weeks they had escalated to a whole new level.

'Personal prejudices aside, I think Schaar's done a good job,' Klimt said.

'You're young,' Yedas snorted. 'I've been on this planet for twenty years. I know what it was like before he came along.'

'And that was?'

Yedas pulled out the necklace he wore under his uniform. It was the only memento he kept from his homeworld and he had a habit of playing with it when he was nervous.

'More disciplined. The scum from the Downside knew their place.' He let the necklace hang outside his uniform.

'The poor like Schaar because he blames us for their problems. The rich tolerate him because they make money and now this "war" will mean that he can tighten his grip on power and line his pockets even more.'

Klimt shrugged his shoulders.

'Things seem to be improving though.'

Yedas bridled. Klimt took this as a bad sign. Even though he was only eighteen months into his posting on Persana he knew his partner's body language intimately.

'Schaar is a passing trend.'

Klimt laughed and tried to make a joke of Yedas's escalating anger.

'Maybe to you, but the rest of us have to get on with the world as it is and the one constant is that everything changes in time.'

Yedas stared at him without blinking.

'That sounds like heresy to me.'



ONCE INSIDE THE power station the two Enforcers moved stealthily through the cavernous lower hall. As they approached the gang of six who stood near the stairs to the upper gantry, Yedas shattered the silence.

'Enforcer! Put down your weapons!'

Klimt's surprise was buried under a hail of fire. The two officers quickly dived behind a pair of adjacent coolant towers as bullets ripped through the metal and gouged up rockrete.

As Yedas returned fire and one of the criminals fell, two of the gang ran for the upper levels. Seeing this, the older Enforcer turned to his younger partner.

'I need you to cover me.'

Klimt nodded and began offering covering fire as Yedas weaved his way from behind the coolant tower to the ladder that led to the upper gantry and the central core.

Continuing to duck, he quickly fired off six shots. The tower took more rounds into its metallic shell. Hearing the tearing and denting of the metal that protected him, Klimt knew that his haven wouldn't be that for much longer.

Diving into the crossfire, Klimt began to roll along the cold, hard floor. Rockrete chips rose up as he evaded the bullets that buzzed around him.

His body glove softened most of the impact, but it still jarred him from his jaw down to the base of his spine.

There were three gunmen firing at Klimt. They were positioned behind a stack of empty barrels covered with a dirty tarpaulin.

Klimt continued to fire. As he reached a similar vantage point behind a smaller stack of barrels, one of his shots caught the central gunman right between the eyes. A halo of crimson jetted upwards.

Above the gunmen's heads hung a platform suspended by two chains on a pulley. It was used to winch waste to the upper levels to help power the secondary

core and was made of wrought iron, about four inches thick and roughly twenty feet wide.

Rising from his crouched position, catching a bullet in his left arm as he moved, Klimt fired off two rounds at the chains securing the platform to the pulley. The chains broke and it fell, crushing the gunmen beneath the huge panel of metal. The noise was deafening.

As Klimt emerged from his position. His arm burning from the wound, he assessed the scene. Four lay dead. That left two more on the upper levels being pursued by Yedas.

Klimt heard the gunshot from above.

As he rushed along the upper gantry, Klimt blocked out the sound and fury of the liquid metal core of the central generator.

Stepping out onto the circular platform that surrounded the top of the core, Klimt could see no one. Turning and surveying the scene, he paused when he heard a noise behind him.

Leading with his pistol, he knelt and moved towards a tiny alcove. The source of the noise was the low moaning of a man. Klimt moved in closer. He was small, feral and dressed shabbily. Blood poured down his face from a head wound that appeared to have been inflicted by a blow from the handle of a pistol or a similar blunt object.

The man recoiled as Klimt pushed his gun into his face.

'Where's your partner?' Klimt shouted.

The man snivelled and pointed at the bubbling core.

'And the other Enforcer officer?' Klimt asked desperately.

The man hesitated. His eyes danced and refused to make contact with Klimt's. The young Enforcer lost his composure. He grabbed the cowering criminal by the throat and pushed his sidearm forcefully at the man's head.

'Answer me, or I swear I will shoot you where you sit!'

The shaking criminal finally spoke.

'He... he struggled with Jonek... They both fell into the core.'

On hearing this Klimt released the man's arm, which he was gripping like a vice. Klimt fell back on the platform onto his backside.

He let his pistol drop and suddenly felt cold again.



AS THE GUN barrel pushed tighter against his head, one thought swirled around in Sacris's mind.

'I'm an idiot!'

How it had happened, he wasn't sure. Fatigue after a twenty-four hour crowd control shift? Maybe, but every other member of the Enforcers stationed on Persana was out doing the same and they weren't being held at gunpoint in the lobby of the fortress.

But then it wasn't everyday that the Planetary Governor was assassinated.

As the only other two officers in the foyer at the time tried to placate the screaming perp, Sacris found it ironic that he should get caught out like a first year cadet on a day when virtually every other Enforcer was out trying to prevent Persana from slipping further into anarchy.

If he hadn't begun to black out from the pressure on his throat, he may even have allowed himself a sardonic smile.

The assailant was young, barely out of adolescence. He was nervous as hell and coming down off of Idea or one of the other low grade chems that the denizens of the Downside frequently used.

'Stay back or I'll shoot!'

As the elevator doors opened and deposited an unusually pre-occupied Enforcer Klimt into the fortress foyer, the last thing he was anticipating was becoming embroiled in a hostage situation.

That his imminent departure to a new posting on Caldana was now on hold, thanks to the fall out from Governor Schaar's assassination, merely compounded the confusion he already felt due to the package that lay open on his bunk upstairs.

All available Enforcers had been placed on active duty until further notice, but Klimt was having a hard time focusing on anything at the present time.

That changed the moment Klimt saw the young officer with the gun pointed at his head. All thoughts of personal distraction became secondary.

All that mattered was the job before him.

The medic and the duty officer turned sharply as they saw Klimt striding towards them. He was dressed in his blue Enforcer uniform and his sidearm was clearly on view.

'Don't do anything rash,' the duty officer squealed. Klimt shot him a look that let him know exactly what he thought of his advice.

The shooter was becoming visibly more agitated. The narcotic euphoria of Idea had made it seem perfectly rational to overpower the tired officer who'd wearily taken off his helmet and left his gun holster unbuckled. But now, without Idea whispering in his ear, the implications of this action were quickly catching up with him.

'Stay back!'

Klimt said nothing, but continued to move forward until he faced the gunman and Sacris barely ten feet away.

The gunman was perspiring profusely, his hands shaking rhythmically. The gun, growing ever slicker in his palm, was erratically working the circumference of Sacris's temple.

Sacris remained rigid. His body locked in position so as to not give his captor any sudden cause to fire. Even though his shoulders burned and his concentration was waning, when Klimt nodded, Sacris knew he would be okay.

'I told you the first time, stay ba—'

He didn't know what the object was – an explosive? a knife? – but as it left Klimt's hand on a trajectory towards his face, he reasoned that he had to shoot it.

Raising the gun from his hostage's temple to shoot the object in mid-flight gave Sacris the opening he needed. In a second he had shifted his body enough to throw the shooter off balance.

Three shots rang out.

As the medic quickly moved in to examine his neck, Sacris looked up and saw Klimt approaching. He began to formulate an appropriate 'thank you', but before he could open his mouth, Klimt walked straight past him.

Kneeling down alongside the gunman's body, Klimt picked up the bullet-shattered dataplate. Without breaking his stride, Klimt tossed the broken dataplate at the surprised duty officer and continued walking back towards the elevator.

'I was going to get you to send that to Caldana for me. Broadcast a personal transmission instead; tell them I won't be leaving here until the trouble in the city is over.'

As he entered the elevator and turned to face the eerie silence of the foyer, Sacris and Klimt shared a glance.

In the two years he had been stationed on Persana, Sacris had never spoken to Klimt, but his reputation preceded him.

He was a legend among the other officers, forging his formidable reputation on countless cases during the decade of bloody civil strife. Many recent graduates took it on themselves to observe Klimt in action. It was a way of learning how to deal with life on the tinderbox that was Persana, something even other senior officers encouraged.

Sacris had studied Klimt from afar and knew his expression, style and body language as well as he knew his own. It was therefore all the more surprising for Sacris to see Klimt nervously fiddling with his pistol as he waited for the elevator doors to close.



IT WASN'T UNTIL the medic had checked and discharged him from duty that Sacris realised just how quiet the fortress actually was.

As he stood by the near-indestructible plastiglass window of his quarters and looked down, Sacris thought that – without sound – the violence and movement of the riot in the city below was almost poetic.

Angry oranges and yellows were crowned by thick black smoke. It looked a lot like the ceremonial war paintings that Sacris's grandfather used to paint back on their homeworld.

Sacris slid his hand across the control panel that was mounted to the left of the window. The plastiglass silently disappeared

into its distributor frame. The noise from below was deafening.

The din of breaking glass, gunshots and human screams collided, each of them vying for primacy but merely flattening together into the collective sound of the city tearing itself apart.

Sacris flicked the switch on the control panel and the plastiglass reformed in an instant. Silence returned and the only reminder of the terror below was the acrid smell of smoke and fire that filled the room.



THE CONTENTS OF the package had deeply unsettled Klimt. Apart from the interlude in the foyer he'd been wrestling with its implications all day.

Like some weird code it brought together the ghosts of the past with the twilight of his present, but without any pattern as to its deeper meaning.

As he sat alone, staring at the twisting object hanging from the handlebars, Klimt finally knew what he had to do.



THE AIR WAS always cooler in the vehicle pool and many Enforcers used to escape down there when the pressure of law enforcement on Persana got too much. Sacris was usually one of them, but tonight, as he entered the open basement, he was going there to apologise.

He'd approached Klimt's quarters with a certain amount of trepidation and was disappointed when he discovered – after finally mustering the courage to knock on the senior officer's door – that he wasn't there.

As he'd turned to leave, he heard a voice behind him.

'He's in the vehicle pool.'

It was Enforcer Magellan. He was standing in the doorway of his quarters situated across the corridor from Klimt's.

Magellan was recuperating from an incident in the Downside two months previously and leant on crutches as he smiled at Sacris. A street gang peddling liquid Idea had gotten the upper hand on Magellan and his partner. The incident had cost Magellan's partner his life and it had been touch and go as to whether Magellan would follow. Luckily, the medics had managed to save him, albeit at the expense of one of his kidneys.

'When was that?'

'Five minutes ago.'

He thanked Magellan and made his way down the corridor to the turbo shaft at the end of the hall.

Entering the relatively empty vehicle pool, Sacris saw Klimt was sitting on the saddle of his bike. He looked as if he were looking at something suspended on his handlebars.

As he approached, Sacris wasn't sure what he should say. 'Thank you,' was the intention, but he was concerned that he would appear even less substantial than he had when Klimt saved his life.

On reflection, Sacris realised that pride was getting in the way of sense. This was a mistake that Enforcers were encouraged to avoid.

He began to walk over.



GETTING TO WITHIN a few feet of the senior Enforcer, Sacris noticed that Klimt appeared to take an object that was hanging from the handlebars and put it in his pocket.

Klimt looked up and stared at the young officer.

'It's Sacris, isn't it?'

Klimt could tell that the younger man was a little awe struck, but he continued to look into Sacris's eyes without blinking. It was a trick he'd developed over the years that managed to unnerve even the most hardened perp.

Apparently it seemed to work just as well on fellow Enforcers too.

'Nice work upstairs.'

Sacris felt himself turning red with shame. He knew that this was just a foretaste of the ridicule he would get from the massed ranks of his colleagues. That the first assault came from someone he admired hurt even more.

'I... I came down here to say thank you.'

Klimt waved Sacris away.

'Forget it. You survived – that's all that matters.'

'Thanks to you.'

Klimt let a small but ironic grin crack his otherwise stern face.

'Well, let me give you some advice – don't let it happen again.'

Sacris noticed that despite his calm demeanour, Klimt was nervously moving his hands on the handlebars.

'Are you going out into the city to help with the pacification?'

Klimt paused long enough to arouse Sacris's suspicion.

'No... I've got to follow up a lead on the assassination.'

This struck Sacris as odd.

'And you were going alone?'

Klimt gave the younger man a withering stare.

'Yes.'

Sacris looked the elder Enforcer directly in the eye.

'It's a breach of regulations to go into a potentially life-threatening situation without back-up.'

Klimt held Sacris's gaze.

'You think I'm unaware of regulations?'

Sacris smiled and Klimt looked away.

It was true, he needed back-up, and he knew the young Enforcer was angling to come with him. Maybe to get out of the fortress, but more likely to try and make it up to Klimt for saving his life earlier. The reasoning didn't matter.

The older Enforcer paused. Who else was going to help him? Everyone else was either out in the streets fighting to maintain order, recovering from injury or ass-welded to a desk job. And did he really have to tell this eager, but – from what he'd seen so far – unimpressive, young officer the whole truth?

Klimt looked up and nodded his head in the direction of the exit.

'Suit up and be back here in five minutes.'



THE RIDE INTO the Downside was hard. Burning vehicles lined the streets. Broken glass covered the sidewalks, shop fronts were ablaze and buildings were being ransacked indiscriminately.

It was the worst day on the streets that Klimt had seen. The atmosphere was pure poison and the relationship between the population and the Enforcers which, thanks to Governor Schaar's skilful playing off of these two opposing forces, permanently bubbled somewhere between hostile and hateful was now boiling over in a way that it had always threatened, but somehow just avoided.

Turning off from the main street, the concentration of violence thinned out considerably and the road ahead seemed clear.

Most of the rioting was occurring near the Central Amphitheatre in the heart of the Downside. This was where Schaar had been giving his annual Festival of Light address when two sniper shots from a nearby rooftop turned the world upside down.

It was funny. As Klimt rode through the streets of the Downside, he couldn't help but remember the first time he experienced its degenerate charm.

His first sight of Persana had been from the air. Through the plastiglass window of the transport ship, it appeared to him as a gleaming jewel dwarfed and bracketed by the giant twin structures of the power station and the fortress at either end of the city.

He didn't know then that life inside the 'jewel' was anything but precious.

Klimt had been expecting a squad flyer to take him to the fortress from the spaceport, but was surprised to discover that he would be sharing a bike with the man who had just introduced himself as his partner.

'You want to learn about Persana?' Yedas had asked as they walked to the bike.

'Sure,' Klimt had replied glibly.

The only thing that matched the arrogance of Klimt's response was the shock he received as they hit the Downside.

Sat on the back of the bike, Klimt was rapt at the procession of human and alien life at its rawest that unfolded before him.

The energy on the streets was palpable. Street vendors and musicians rubbed up against pick-pockets and gang members, all of them trying to scratch a living on the grey, eroded sidewalks, alongside Salvationists who believed that the Emperor himself was coming to take everyone up to the feet of his Golden Throne in one enormous rapture.

It was ugly and beautiful in equal measure.

They stopped in the traffic and Yedas turned to him.

'Bet you've never seen such a collection of freaks, weirdo's and outcasts?'

Klimt had to agree that he hadn't.

Yedas began to laugh as the traffic began to move again.

'And they think that fraud Schaar is going to save them?'

The engine roar drowned out his laughter, but Klimt could feel the vibrations through his partners body as the bike drove on through the night.



THE TWO ENFORCERS arrived at the grim hab-block on the edge of the downside just after midnight. The building stood four storeys high and its exterior brickwork was half eaten away by the chemical storms that occasionally befell this part of town.

The stairwell was deserted and rain damage stained the walls. Sacris brushed corrosive moisture drops from his uniform as he climbed the steps.

On reaching the fourth floor, the two Enforcers turned left and continued down the dark, peeling corridor until they reached door number four-zero-four.

Klimt nodded at Sacris. Both men drew and cocked their pistols.

The rotten door flew off of its hinges with one kick from Klimt's right boot. Both Enforcers entered the room crouched, their guns drawn. The apartment was silent.

As Klimt went off to search the other rooms, Sacris tossed the sitting room. Not only was it dark and dank, but the floor was covered with rotting food and assorted garbage.

In the corner, by a dust-encrusted pict-viewer, were fifteen identical boxes, stacked up like cans of provisions.

Each box contained forty inhalers. They were meant for citizens with respiratory problem but their alternative street use was as a delivery system for a potent vaporised form of the drug Idea.

Sacris was pretty certain that the occupant of the apartment was not a licensed apothecary.

Exiting the main room, Sacris called after the senior officer. There was no response. As he moved through the dark apartment, the younger officer began to realise that he was enjoying himself.

His train of thought was derailed the moment he entered the bedroom.

The corpse that lay atop the unmade bed had been shot in the head, the rear of the skull obliterated by the exit velocity of the bullet. The wall behind the bed was daubed a violent red.

But it wasn't the blood that made the wall striking.

Virtually every inch was papered with a vast collage comprised of images and text relating to the late Planetary Governor Schaar.

'By the Emperor...' Sacris whispered.

Many of the images in the collage had been culled from a variety of news sources, yet some had obviously been taken covertly by stealth camera at various public events.

Different news headlines - detailing Schaar's strained relationship with the Imperium and the Enforcers - bracketed and bordered the images. Judging by the yellowing of much of the central part of the collage, the pictures and articles had been built up over a substantial period of time.

The most recent article was dated two weeks ago and detailed Schaar's continued resistance to the Imperium's plans to call in the forces once and for all.

It had been a popular move with the general populace of the Downside.

Written through the middle of the collage in fresh, black paint was one word: *Heretic!*

Klimt stood transfixed by the wall. Sacris couldn't help but look at the body.

The man on the bed was small and feral in appearance and wore threadbare clothes that were in keeping with the general décor of the apartment. His face was contorted. His eyes rolled up inside the lids.

Resting across the body was an AP-24 sniper's rifle. Neither needed to say that it was the same type of gun that had been used to kill the Governor.

Sacris rubbed his hand through his hair before finally speaking.

'Looks like that's the Schaar case closed.'

Klimt raised his head and looked over at Sacris with suspicion.

'Why do you say that?'

Initially, Sacris thought his superior was joking, but soon realised he wasn't.

'The shooter obviously came back here after he killed Schaar and sucked down on the barrel.'

Klimt motioned with his head in the direction of the wall.

'Pull the bullet out of the wall.'

Sacris looked over at the hole in the wall where the bullet had entered. Pulling his knife from his gauntlet, he dug into the plaster and extracted the bullet from the wall.

It fell into his palm. Sacris examined it closely.

'This bullet is from a pistol.'

Klimt nodded. He shifted on the spot, looking down at the corpse on the bed before adding:

'This man was murdered by Governor Schaar's assassin.'

Sacris took a moment to check what he'd just heard.

'How can you be so sure?'

'Believe me,' Klimt said.

Sacris sat down on the edge of the bed. He didn't know what to think.

'Sir... what's going on here?'

There was silence in the room, a silence that overpowered the stench of damp and death. The situation was a lot more serious

than Klimt had envisaged and Sacris had seen too much already.

He reached into his right side pocket and handed its contents to Sacris.

Sitting in his palm was a ceremonial necklace and a single bullet. The bullet was of the same calibre as that used by the rifle currently lying on top of the corpse.

'I don't understand...'

The older officer relaxed his stance and looked down at the floor as he began speaking.

'Earlier today – before I saved you – I received a package.'

Klimt shifted awkwardly on the spot.

'Inside was the necklace, the bullet and a printed note with this address.'

Klimt looked over at the corpse wistfully.

'I didn't know he lived here.'

'Who's he?'

'He is, or was, Scabus Jenk.' Klimt paused for a second. 'He was also the last person to see my partner alive ten years ago.'

Sacris looked down at the necklace and the bullet in his hand.

'You think he sent you this?'

Klimt smiled weakly.

'Someone did.'

Closing his fist around the necklace, Sacris took a moment to process what he'd just been told. Klimt stood by the window looking out at the oppressive night sky.

Sacris got up from the bed and walked into the bathroom. He felt dirty and needed to wash his face. Klimt was still staring out of the window when he re-entered the bedroom.

'Someone definitely knew you were coming.'

Klimt turned and saw Sacris standing before him holding a cheap, white envelope.

'It was taped to the mirror in the bathroom.'

Klimt's name was written on the envelope in black ink. He took it and opened it hesitantly, scanning the note inside.

He let the envelope and note fall to the floor.

'We have to leave.'

Before Sacris could reply, Klimt had walked past him and out of the door.

Sacris moved over and picked up the crumpled, printed note from the floor. It read: *Ten years asleep. See you at the mausoleum.*



AS THE BIKES tore through the guts of the Downside on this night of eternal darkness, Klimt couldn't help but conclude that in the last fifteen years – despite the prevailing wisdom of the time – things had gotten worse under Schaar.

A planet ravaged by war, sixty-five per cent unemployment, a forty per cent rise in crime and a population more dependent on handouts than ever before.

This was Governor Schaar's legacy.

As he and Sacris turned down the deserted back streets, Klimt noticed a huge mural, freshly painted on the wall of an abandoned market. The mural read: *Blood cries for blood.*

The words evoked something in Klimt, his mind wandering back ten long years.

It was just before the incident at the power station and Yedas had recently been informed that the case against Jorsted was about to be dropped. The heat was building and Governor Schaar was openly pushing for Yedas's badge; leaking allegations to the press that Yedas had roughed up Jorsted a little too much during one particular interrogation.

Klimt had been there when this had allegedly occurred and Yedas had treated Jorsted like any Enforcer would have treated any other suspected criminal on Persana.

That was the thing about Yedas. He was always by the book.

At the time, Klimt had naively thought his partner would get a token punishment and that would be it. With the benefit of hindsight and experience, he now knew that Yedas was facing suspension and redeployment to another posting or – as seemed more likely – expulsion from the force.

On this particular night, Klimt had come to see Yedas about some evidence relating to another case. It was late and Yedas was

in his room. As Klimt approached he could see that the door was open.

He peered round the half open doorway of Yedas's quarters. On the bed, Klimt could see his partner sitting, head in hands, weeping softly to himself.

Klimt hesitated. Should he go in or turn and walk away? He took a few moments before finally turning away from the door and moving back towards his own quarters.

He'd thought no more of it until tonight. But now, for the first time, he considered whether Yedas had left the door open on purpose. Perhaps in the hope that someone would find him before it was too late.



ON ENTERING THE power plant for the first time in ten years, Klimt felt a shiver climb the length of his spine. The bullet holes in the cold floor still remained. The dents in the coolant tower still pock marked its surface.

Climbing the gantry, Klimt was overwhelmed by the heat pouring forth from the central core. For a second it was as if the last decade had never happened. He half-expected to find Scabus Jenk cowering in the same alcove.

The almost familiar voice behind him shattered Klimt's nostalgic interlude.

'You made it then?'

Klimt turned. He recognised the outline of the man before him immediately. He cleared his throat and tried to speak without betraying the emotion in his voice.

'How could I not, old friend?'



THE EVENING AIR was cold, but inside Sacris was bubbling with rage.

Not only had Klimt lied to him, he'd also forced the younger Enforcer to sit outside and wait like an errant child when Sacris reasoned Klimt needed back-up most.

He'd argued this with Klimt, but to no avail. He truly was as stubborn as his reputation suggested, but Sacris was surprised that someone could be so self-defeating in their stubbornness.

The high esteem in which he held the older officer plummeted the colder he got. What was the point of waiting around for Klimt to be brought out in a body bag while he froze to his saddle?

It was in this growing spirit of rebellion and disillusionment that Sacris finally got up from the bike and began the slow walk into the power plant via the south entrance.

I've made one bad decision already today, the young Enforcer thought to himself as he cocked and loaded his sidearm.

What difference is one more going to make?



AS THE TWO men faced each other across the platform that surrounded the central core, the static in the air was almost audible.

'You look well, for a dead man.'

Yedas laughed. It echoed around the high roof and encircled Klimt until he wasn't sure if it was Yedas laughing after all, but rather himself.

'As droll as ever,' Yedas intoned, barely suppressing his disdain. He'd always had a way of making Klimt feel inferior and that talent had seemingly remained undiminished in the intervening years.

'You caught up with our old friend, Mr Jenk?'

'I found his body, if that's what you mean.'

Yedas put his hands into the pockets of the duster he wore. Klimt's body tensed.

'I'd like to say that he'd improved as a person in the decade I spent with him, but when you're dealing with Downside scum as thick and recalcitrant as that, you're deluding yourself if you think they ever rise above what they are.'

Yedas removed his right hand from his pocket and rubbed his face idly.

'Still, he served his purpose.'

'And that was?' Klimt asked icily.

Yedas smiled at his former partner.

'To help me set Persana on the long road to salvation.'

As he talked, Yedas appeared so perfectly calm and detached it was almost as if he were reciting lines he had learned by rote.

'The heresy on this planet that the Enforcers have allowed makes me sick to my stomach.'

'There has been no heresy on Persana.'

Yedas let out a muted laugh.

'You think those heretics down in the south aren't in league with Schaar? From the day he took office, everything he has done has been to line his own pocket and to undermine the Enforcers' authority.'

Looking at Yedas, Klimt realised that the image of Yedas as a raving madman he had constructed in his mind on the drive over from the apartment block was being demolished before his eyes.

Yedas was many things, but mad was not one of them.

'Why do you think he's resisted the call for Astartes reinforcements? It would reveal this whole war, this whole abortion of a society he sits atop, as being the abomination it is.'

Klimt breathed deeply, absorbing what his former partner had just said.

'That's an interesting theory, but we would have uncovered this a long time ago.'

Yedas slowly slipped his hand back into the pocket of his duster.

'When have the Enforcers ever seen beyond the end of their nose?'

Klimt's head was beginning to throb.

'No, you're wrong.'

Yedas's face darkened. It was almost as if his patience in indulging Klimt was visibly at an end.

'Have you ever considered that it may be you who is wrong?'

Yedas pulled his pistol and fired at his former partner.

Klimt had been watching Yedas's hand for the last minute. It enabled him to evade the shot. He hit the iron grille floor with a thud.

Drawing his own sidearm from its holster he tried to return fire, but it was kicked from his hand before he could cock or load.

The echo of the pistol smashing against metal took an eternity to die away. When it did, Klimt was faced with the snubbed barrel of Yedas's pistol pressed into his face.

The older man looked down at Klimt with an expression that seemed peculiarly pained as his grip on the trigger tightened.

Klimt closed his eyes, waiting for the inevitable.

'Freeze!'

Klimt opened his eyes again and saw Sacris standing behind Yedas. The younger Enforcer had his pistol pointed at the back of Yedas's head. His face was hard and focused.

'Put the gun down!'

Yedas threw the pistol to the floor in front of him.

'I'm arresting you for the murder of Governor Schaar.'

Klimt repositioned himself on his haunches and moved to pick up Yedas's pistol.

'Raise your hands above your head,' Sacris barked loudly.

As the older man raised his arms, he twisted and moved with a speed that Sacris was unprepared for.

Unencumbered by body armour and using his still formidable reflexes, Yedas disarmed Sacris and had the younger Enforcer's firearm at his head before Klimt could lift the gun from the floor.

Yedas held Sacris tight as he sneered at both Enforcers.

'And there I was thinking that the quality of recruits had reached an all-time low with your generation, Klimt.'

Klimt looked up from his position on the floor. He held Yedas's pistol limply at his side. Raising the gun from the shadows, Klimt fired two shots from the pistol in his hand.

Sacris screamed. The bullets tore through both his legs, just above the knee.

Yedas was frozen to the spot.

As Sacris slumped to the floor, it gave Klimt just enough time to fire off another shot.

The bullet tore through Yedas's left shoulder. The older man was knocked back onto the floor. Klimt tried to fire again.

Click!

The clip was empty.

By the time he had scrambled back and found his own pistol in the shadows, Yedas was gone. A trail of blood and his abandoned duster the only sign of his ever having been there.

Klimt – keeping low to the ground – moved over to the downed Sacris. Quickly binding the younger man's wounds with strapping torn from Yedas's duster, Klimt helped Sacris over to the alcove where Scabus Jenk had hidden ten years before.



AS HE MOVED through the hungry darkness of the power station, following the trail of blood that Yedas had left behind, Klimt continued to duck as bullets ricocheted against the railings.

Kneeling close to the floor, Klimt heard a familiar clicking sound echo across the cavernous hall.

Yedas's gun was empty.

Klimt slowly rose to his haunches and continued onwards.

Moving along the walkways, Klimt approached the open furnace of the secondary core. The heat from the core was intense and it burned furiously through the grille under his feet.

It was above the core that Klimt finally found Yedas.

He had left the walkway and was clambering across the gap between the north and south gantries. The only link between the gantries was via five parallel platforms that hung from the plant's roof over the bubbling secondary core. This was the only route to escape via the North Entrance.

Holstering his pistol, Klimt jumped over the side and onto the first unstable platform. The platform moved significantly with his added weight, but he held onto the chains that attached the platforms to the

pulleys in the roof and secured his footing.

The two men were half-way across the gap when they met face to face again.

Yedas turned as Klimt lunged for him. Deflecting Klimt's blows with his forearm, the older man knocked his former partner to the floor. As Klimt rose to his feet, Yedas pulled a knife from his boot and slashed him across the chest.

Klimt fell to the floor, bleeding and exhausted.

'You're a disgrace to the Enforcers, just as this planet is a disgrace to the Imperium.'

Klimt looked up at his former partner. He felt pity for him, but as he pulled his own blade from his gauntlet and plunged it into the side of Yedas's knee, he could only think of survival.

He turned it twice before letting go.

Yedas fell backwards in agony, his own knife falling from his hand as he grabbed at the small blade that was embedded almost to the hilt into the side of his knee.

As Yedas lay there, Klimt slowly rose to his feet. He pulled his pistol from its holster and pointed it down at Yedas.

He hesitated for a moment and then lowered the gun.

Leaving Yedas writhing on the floor, Klimt jumped back towards the relative sanctuary of the adjacent platform and raised his pistol to the roof.

Yedas could see his former partner's intention and looked at him with pleading eyes.

Klimt remained firm.

'Give my regards to Governor Schaar.'

He fired twice at the pulley supporting Yedas's platform and watched as Yedas fell towards the molten core below.

Falling backwards onto the metal platform, for a moment Klimt allowed himself the luxury of closing his eyes.

It had been a strange day.



SAFE IN THE alcove, Sacris looked down at the communicator in his hand. As he dialled the fortress's frequency, Sacris composed an entire transcript for the disciplinary hearing he was convinced he would now be facing.

The phantom hearing concluded with Sacris being found guilty of gross incompetence and sentenced to penal servitude for the rest of his days.

Sacris was already mining with the other Chem-Dogs on the deadmoons of Savlar when he felt a gun barrel press against his cheek.

Not daring to look around, Sacris was convinced that this time he was finished. He was surprised therefore to hear a familiar voice whisper into his ear.

'Turn that off, or I'll shoot you.'

It was Klimt.

'You look terrible,' Sacris ventured as he switched off the communicator.

Klimt didn't respond.

It was Sacris who finally broke the silence.

'Was Yedas telling the truth?'

For the first time in a decade, Klimt didn't have an answer.

The silence spoke volumes.



HIS LEAST FAVOURITE section of the Enforcer fortress had always been the medical bay. Even though it had been remodelled and remodelled twice since he had been stationed here, a change in equipment and décor did not remove the antiseptic smell that Klimt always associated with death.

The one time he'd been required to stay overnight in the bay he'd discharged himself within an hour of his arrival. Yedas had laughed at him then and said...

But that was in the past now.

As Klimt turned the corner into the main ward he was struck by how many Enforcers had been hospitalised during the riots. It was estimated that a quarter of the force had been injured and about one hundred had lost their lives. He didn't

even want to think about how many civilians had been injured or killed, but surveying the scarred and blackened city this morning he knew the prognosis was not good.

'Hey, Klimt!'

Klimt turned sharply. It was Sacris. The younger Enforcer smiled at him. Considering that he was in traction with two broken legs from the gunshot wounds that the older man had inflicted upon him, Klimt felt that was generous.

Klimt stood at the edge of the bed.

'How are you?'

'Well I won't be joining a dance class anytime soon, but other than that...'

Sacris looked over at the Enforcer in the next bed. Bandages covered him from his head to his feet. He'd been set alight by a group of thugs during the riot. The medics didn't anticipate he'd make it through the night.

'I'm fine.'

Klimt could see that Sacris, despite his upbeat exterior, had been changed by the experiences of the last few days. Where he was once eager and bright eyed, he now carried the dulled colouration of a veteran. For Klimt it was like looking into a mirror.

'How did your meeting with the Majore go?'

'Interesting.'

After Klimt had brought Sacris back to the Fortress he'd demanded a meeting with his superior straight away. The Majore wasn't prone to being ordered around, especially during a crisis, but when Klimt hinted at its nature he quickly found time to see him.

The Majore sat stoney faced as Klimt told him everything. When he'd finished his superior leaned forward on his elbows.

'Never speak of this again.'

The story that had already begun circulating in the press was that Scabus Jenk – a known criminal with links to both organised crime and various loyalist secessionist groups – had acted alone in assassinating Governor Schaar.

Despite this, in some quarters whispers of a conspiracy had already begun to gain currency. There was nothing anyone

could do to stop the apocrypha of idle gossip that would grow around this subject. Klimt was glad he wouldn't be around to see it escalate.

'What time does your transport leave?' Sacris enquired.

'In an hour.'

Sacris looked disappointed.

'After everything, I thought you might stay.'

Klimt shook his head.

'Well, good luck.'

Klimt smiled. 'You too.'

He extended his hand to Sacris. The younger man took it and shook it firmly. As he withdrew his hand he felt Klimt slip something into his grasp.

Opening his hand, Sacris looked down and saw Yedas's necklace sitting in his palm.

He looked up, but Klimt was already gone.

Placing the chain over his head, Sacris lay back onto the pillow. The weight of the necklace around his throat was uncomfortable, but something would not allow him to take it off.



AS KLIMT LOOKED down at Persana from the air for the last time he felt a sense of sadness for the planet below and for the future it would have.

Already, transport ships containing battalions of Imperial Guardsmen were massing in the upper stratosphere, preparing to descend upon Persana and begin the liquidation of the secessionist forces once and for all.

Turning away from the window, Klimt tried to settle down for the long journey ahead. He gave up after five minutes.

Staring once more at the eternal blackness of space, one phrase kept echoing through Klimt's mind. It was, he thought, the only thing of any value he'd learnt from his time on Persana.

Everything changes in time. ❖

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The Hanging Tree

By
Jonathan Green

THE STURDY OAK door of the inn opened with a crash and for just a moment a gust of what the weather outside had to offer – nothing but foul wind and rain – entered the Slaughtered Calf. It seemed hard to believe that it was early spring. It was more like autumn or winter had a hold of these hills.

Grolst, the thickset, greasy-skinned innkeeper, looked up from wiping a grimy, damp cloth around the inside of an a dirty glass. He cast an unwelcoming grimace from beneath beetling brows at the figure standing in the shadows of the doorway, the evening sky darkening behind him. The man ducked beneath the lintel and closed the door behind him. The foul night's wailing wind and lashing rain became a muffled memory outside the thick stone walls once more. Leaning on a tall, gnarled staff, the figure stepped into the pool of light cast by the cartwheel candelabra.

Grolst surveyed the new arrival suspiciously. The frown on his ruddy face remained. Although swathed in heavy wine-dark robes, the innkeeper could see that beneath them the man was tall and lean, like a hunting dog. His appearance was scruffy and unkempt. He appeared to be into his fifth decade, both his bedraggled black hair, what there was of it on his balding pate, and his long straggly beard greying to white. The skin on his face appeared taught, making his hawkish features even more severe and pronounced.

On closer examination, Grolst could see that in places the grey-bearded man's robes were scorched black. There was also the glint of metal from objects hung around his neck and from his robes. Grolst thought he even saw a gleaming bird's skull, a brass key, hanging from

his belt – or maybe it was gold – and the hilt of a sword protruding from beneath a fold in his cloak. The stranger's staff tapped against the floor as he approached the bar.

The red-robed stranger peered at the various dusty bottles and earthenware containers displayed haphazardly on the crooked shelves behind the innkeeper.

'A glass of that... luska,' the man said grumpily, placing a pair of copper coins on the bar top. 'I hate the rain,' he added, addressing no one in particular as he shook water from his cloak.

Grolst uncorked a grime-coated bottle and poured a measure of the clear Ostland spirit into a small tumbler. He blinked as the potent alcoholic vapour reached his nostrils. Luska was a fiery Ostlander distillation, not unlike the vodka spirit so favoured by the Kislevites, and as it coursed down the drinker's throat it burnt hotter than a salamander's tongue. It took a certain taste and a fiery temperament in the drinker to even palate the spirit, let alone actually enjoy it.

Perhaps the stranger had some connection to Kislev. From the few words that he had spoken, his accent sounded as though it might come from the sheep-rearing southern provinces of the Empire, but the man wore his moustaches long and drooping, favoured here in the northern realms that bordered the harsh oblast of Kislev, the kingdom of the Tzars. The stranger was well travelled, certainly.

He picked up his drink and took a seat at a table close to the fire blazing in the hearth of the inn's huge chimney breast. From the man's dress Grolst thought that he was most likely a scholar of some field of academic study or other. From the way he travelled alone, without the need for a bodyguard, the innkeeper decided that he probably had some other means of defence that he could call upon in an emergency. Grolst looked at the staff again.

Viehdorf didn't receive much in the way of passing travellers, making their way down from the main road into the wooded hollow where the village nestled. The Slaughtered Calf lay half way between the two amidst the crowding trees and looming hills. Merchants, mercenaries, peddlers and pilgrims mostly preferred to bed down in the larger Scharfen, half a league back in

the direction of Middenheim, or press on along the forest road until they reached the stone-walled security of Felsmauern another half a league further along the road towards Hergig.

The sign over the door hardly seemed appropriate for an establishment called the Slaughtered Calf, although it betrayed the reason for the lack of passing trade. The image of a beastman's head depicted on the swaying inn-sign attested to the fact that here, on the Middenland-Hochland border, the forested hill-country was beastman territory. The deep forests hid their camps and herdstone lairs. To stray from the roads in these parts was to invite a swift demise.

Viehdorf was one of those pockets of civilisation clinging onto survival amidst the chaos and barbarity of a land where, whatever the Emperor comfortable in his palace in distant Altdorf might claim, savage nature was mistress – and a cruel mistress she was indeed, red in tooth and claw. The village was a faint, flickering candle-flame in the all-encompassing darkness of wild lands, where the populace were prey to the uncaring seasons and the harshness of survival.

On occasion the animals belonging to the people of Viehdorf gave birth to unnaturally twisted offspring. When this happened, mother and child were culled, their carcasses destroyed, and the matter not spoken of again, for to do so was to attract the attentions of the witch hunters. Such men were not known for their tolerance, understanding or restraint.

If any did stray this way the people of Viehdorf knew what had to be done.

As Grolst considered this new stranger, he gazed across the barroom and took in the other people sheltering from the unseasonable night within the inn. There were the usual regulars; local foresters and other villagers, including the blacksmith, all eyeing the stranger warily, making him feel about as welcome as the plague. There was also another stranger in their midst that night, an armoured roadwarden.

The atmosphere in the tavern was sullen and hostile, talk was restrained to a conspiratorial murmur; there were two strangers in the bar and they were definitely not welcome here. Strangers

meant trouble. The people of Viehdorf liked to keep themselves to themselves. That was what proved best and had kept them unmolested by the world beyond the forested boundaries of their village, them and their forefathers before them.

The blacksmith was watching the red-robed stranger but he was also giving the roadwarden on the other side of the bar furtive glances. It was on this man that Grolst's gaze came to rest. The roadwarden was dressed in a tough leather jerkin and hard-wearing trews, and wore an armoured hauberk as well. A lobster-tailed helmet sat on the table in front of him.

He had arrived earlier that same evening and Grolst was just as wary of him as he was of the straggly-haired stranger. The roadwarden had paid for one flagon of ale and had made it last for all the time since. He was enjoying a respite from the harsh, unrelenting conditions outside, no doubt. The leather of his jerkin and his trews dried out in the smoky warmth of the inn's interior, the air bitter with the smell of hops, pipe-weed and wood smoke. No one dared actually challenge the man but the daggers in the stares the patrons were giving him made their true desires perfectly plain.

The Slaughtered Calf hardly ever had any visitors, so to have two turn up on one night unsettled Grolst deeply, making the sullen innkeeper feel even less charitable than usual. The inn had rooms for rent, certainly, but Grolst was hard pressed to remember when they had last been used by a passing traveller rather than by the unfaithful, carrying on their lustful affairs away from the eyes of their jealous spouses. It was too close to the sacrifice for his liking, just when the people of Viehdorf didn't want the prying eyes of the Emperor Karl Franz's authorities, witch hunters or any other stranger looking into their business.

There was one last drinker, sitting alone, who was known to Grolst. The man hardly seemed aware of anything about his surroundings; he just stared mournfully into the bottom of his tankard, shoulders slumped, his face a sagging scowl of sadness. Of course, he had good reason to look so unhappy. The responsibility for the sacrifice had come to rest at his door this time.

The roadwarden raised his tankard and drained the last of the hopsy, locally-brewed ale and, taking up his hammer once again, strode purposefully back to the bar. The soldier fixed the innkeeper with his piercing, steely gaze, making Grolst feel even more uncomfortable. The innkeeper felt his flesh crawl under the unrelenting stare and, in order to break the tension, felt obliged to speak: 'You moving on then?'

'I may be,' the roadwarden said, his voice betraying a cultured accent but also a hint of suspicion in its tone.

Grolst immediately regretted his question but also found himself wondering what had made a man of a highborn upbringing become a wandering warrior, patrolling the Emperor's highways and protecting those who would travel on them with lawful intentions, especially at such a time of turmoil.

The roadwarden's manner made Grolst feel uncomfortable enough to provoke a response. 'Is there good hunting to be had on the Emperor's roads?'

'Good enough,' the roadwarden replied. 'Your village seems to have got away remarkably unscathed, considering there are tribes of man-beasts amassing within the forests and that there is a war coming to the Empire, the likes of which have not been seen since the time of Magnus the Pious.'

'A war, you say? I wouldn't know about that. War doesn't trouble us here. So what brings you to our peaceful village?'

'I'm sorry, I should have introduced myself,' the rugged soldier said offering a smile, though his gaze remained as steely and unforgiving as before. 'I am Ludwig Hoffenbach. Dark times are upon the Empire and all men are called to play their part, to hold back the storm of Chaos that is threatening to break across the land. You have heard, I take it, that the once-great sentinel city of Wolfenburg fell to a Northman horde last year?'

'I myself have been called to act as part of an Imperial commission, and I was supposed to meet with my compatriot here. Has a templar of the Sigmarite church visited Viehdorf?'

'A witch hunter, you mean?' the innkeeper said, feeling his scalp tighten.

'By the name of Schweitz.'

Grolst swallowed hard. The blood in his veins felt as if it had turned to ice water. He cast an anxious glance over the roadwarden's armoured shoulder and saw further furtive glances pass around the bar. It was only then that Grolst really realised that the low murmur of conversation inside the Slaughtered Calf had ceased, the foresters, villagers and blacksmith all straining their ears to eavesdrop on what was passing between the innkeeper and the roadwarden. The only one who seemed to be paying no attention at all was the mournful man still staring into the bottom of his pint.

'A witch hunter?' the innkeeper said, trying to keep his tone jovial and the unease out.

Out of the corner of his eye Grolst saw that the crimson-clad stranger was watching the exchange at the bar as intently as the inn's regulars – if anything more so – and fidgeting uncomfortably, apparently at the mention of the witch hunter. Grolst knew how he felt.

'No, there hasn't been anyone like that here.'

The roadwarden lent forward slightly and Grolst couldn't help but notice that his gauntleted hand was resting on the haft of the warhammer slung from his belt.

'Are you sure?' There was the same hard smile on Hoffenbach's lips, the same steel in his eyes.

'Definitely,' Grolst said, managing to force a laugh at the same time. 'I would remember a templar of the Church of Sigmar visiting my poor hovel of an inn. No, no one like that's been in here.'

'Very well,' Hoffenbach said, adjusting his hauberk and making sure that the innkeeper saw not only the insignia of his Imperial commission but also the haft of his warhammer once again. 'Thank you for your... help.' He turned towards the inn door. 'It is time I was gone.'

With that, the roadwarden spun on his iron-shod heel and made to leave the snug of the bar for the wilds of the night outside the walls of the enduring coaching inn. Before he did so, Hoffenbach returned the shifty look the red-robed stranger was giving him.

Then he was gone into the cold, the wind, the dark and the rain.

Grolst went back to occupying himself smearing a tankard with his damp rag, trying to ignore the bewilderment of anxieties and possibilities muddling his mind. They would have to act soon. Grolst would have liked to have believed that Viehdorf had seen the last of the roadwarden but he sincerely doubted it.

The grating of a chair on the floor roused Grolst from his thoughts. The innkeeper looked up reluctantly and saw the red-robe taking his turn to approach the bar. Now what? the innkeeper thought resentfully.

'Do you have any rooms?' the wild-haired stranger said. The darker water stains around the hem of his robes were fading as the thick material began to dry out.

As soon as the man had uttered the words, a seed of an idea took root within the innkeeper's mind. He had not thought the red-robe would stay. He had imagined the stranger would have been on his way, like the roadwarden, once he had finished his drink, even if it was after nightfall.

Grolst felt a smile forming on his ugly lips. As soon as he was aware of it, he recomposed the annoyed grimace that made him look like he was irritated by the fact that anyone would dare to waste his time by actually wanting to be served in his inn.

'If you can pay for it, I have,' he said snidely.

'I have money.' The stranger's hand disappeared inside his robe and emerged again holding a bulging leather purse.

Grolst's eyes lit up involuntarily at the sight of it. 'That should just about do it,' he muttered grudgingly, although the twinkling in the black pits of his pupils betrayed how he truly felt. Not that the stranger appeared to notice: he was too busy glancing, fretfully almost, at the stony faces around the bar.

'I want to retire now,' the stranger said, once the innkeeper had taken payment.

'Would you care for another drink before I show you to your room?' Grolst proffered, displaying uncharacteristic generosity.

The stranger's eyes shot Grolst a suspicious glance, his mouth tight-lipped. Briefly, the innkeeper met the man's gaze.

For a moment, he fancied he could see fires burning deep within them and the ferocity of the flames made him blink and look away.

'All right then, why not?'

Grolst uncorked the luska bottle again, one whiff of the fiery spirit making his eyes start to water. As he poured a measure of the alcohol into the stranger's glass, he was aware that all eyes in the bar were on him and the unwelcome visitor. Even the mournful man was looking up at him, his red-rimmed eyes no longer gazing at the bottom of his drink. Through one grimy, lead-paned window Grolst could see the white-yellow bloated orb of a gibbous moon, rising between the grey-cast clouds behind the trees at the top of the hill, and he found his mind wandering to consider what would come to pass later that night.

The sacrifice had to be made soon, and it would be. The people of Viehdorf might not like strangers intruding into the isolation of their village, but they did have their uses; Viehdorf had its own method of protection against the predations of beastmen and their ilk.

'Here,' he said as he poured the stranger a double measure into a fresh glass. 'You look like you need warming up on a night like this. This one's on the house.'



GERHART BRENNEND looked around the Slaughtered Calf's guest room. He was unimpressed. It was much as he had expected. It was cramped and sparsely decorated. There was one bed, made of rough-hewn timbers, and a chair with a broken leg. The walls were barely plastered and, in places, the bare boards of the internal walls were visible. There was one crack-paned window, which rattled loosely in the wind and rain battering the isolated inn, that looked down onto the stable yard. The tiles of the stable roof were slick with greasy rainwater that ran into leaf-clogged gutters and poured over into the yard in a relentless cascade onto the rain-darkened cobbles.

As Gerhart sat down on the thin straw mattress of the bed a wave of tiredness swept over him. He felt restless despite the weariness that was threatening to overcome him. For a wizard of the noblest Bright Order to have come to this, he thought to himself miserably. Once he had been the holder of the keys of Azimuth, an honoured position in his order, and now he was brought low like this. In fact, he had never been more destitute. His once magnificent robe was scorched and worn shabby, but at least it wasn't wet anymore. There was nothing a fire mage hated more than rain, other than drowning, perhaps.

Even though he suddenly felt bone-numbingly weary, Gerhart still felt ill at ease. It had been the roadwarden's enquiries that had done it, and the talk of witch hunters. He had met enough of their bigoted, paranoid kind before.

Trying to dismiss such concerns from his mind, he lay back on the bed, his eyelids suddenly heavy. It was as if all his exertions of the last year had finally caught up with him. But, as he closed his eyes, the scowling faces of those whom he had met before, who hunted the practitioners of the dark arts and servants of the fell powers, came unbidden into his mind. First, there was the Castigator of Schreibe, his red face contorted by zealous rage. Next came the cruelly calm features of the tonsure-headed priest of Stilwold, Brother Bernhardt – Gerhart involuntarily recalled the marks of the cleric's self-induced mortification that he had suffered in the name of Holy Sigmar. Religious extremism and intolerance could never really be considered positive character traits.

Gerhart was feeling very drowsy now. Then, of course, there was Gottfried Verdammen, the flesh of his face bubbled, red-raw and blistered from the avenging fires...

A sudden noise in the yard below his window roused Gerhart from the drowsy threshold of sleep. A stable door was banging in the persistent wind that whipped through the courtyard behind the inn. Shaking the slumber from him, he rose from the bed and peered out of the corner of the cracked window into the dark and the rain.

Through half-closed eyes he saw a cloaked figure duck into a stable, the door banging shut on its latch behind him. The wizard blinked his eyes clear, but the figure was gone. Had he really seen anyone?

Another wave of fatigue washed over him and he had to sit down on the bed again, as his legs practically gave way beneath him. What had he just seen? Of course, it could be nothing more than an ostler tending the animals stabled there. Gerhart's heightened sense of mistrust would not let him believe something so innocent or simple. What clandestine activity was taking place out in that stable on a night like this?

He could fight the tiredness no longer. Putting his overwhelming exhaustion down to his long journey and the leeching effect of the continual rain on his powers, he gave in at last, falling asleep as soon as his head hit the musty-smelling pillow.



YOU'RE SURE THIS is going to work?' 'Don't worry. I've taken care of things.'

'But the sacrifice has to be made tonight.'

'I told you, it's taken care of.'

'So my Gertrude is safe? Truly?'

'She is now. Remember, we owe everything to our protector, just as our forefathers did in years past. We must make the sacrifice. We all have our part to play. It is better that one die than the village die. The good of the many is what matters. The good of the many.'

Grolst took in the furtive group gathered within the dark of the stable, the smell of mouldering straw and stale horse dung strong in his nostrils. There were four of them, their hunched forms outlined by the rain-washed moonlight. As well as the thickset innkeeper, there was the blacksmith and the mournful looking man from the bar, as well as a bearded, burly forester. Grolst looked around the darkened stable.

Everyone in the village, of adult age at least, knew the truth about Viehdorf, but there was something about their dark secret

that still made them feel uncomfortable speaking of it openly.

'What do you mean, you've taken care of things?' the broad-shouldered blacksmith asked, an edge of anger in his voice.

'Have a little faith, won't you?' the innkeeper said, his slack smile invisible in the gloom.

'Enough of this goading, Grolst,' the forester rumbled. 'Now is not the time for tomfoolery. I've seen the rise in beastman activity in the forests on the borders of our lands. In fact, I've never seen so much in all my born days. We're all troubled by it. We need to ensure that our village remains protected. We cannot miss the sacrifice.'

'And we won't,' Grolst reassured them with all the guile of a serpent. 'He won't give us any trouble. I put poppy seed juice in his glass. He won't have tasted it under the luska. He'll sleep now until doomsday. Won't nothing wake him before we're done with him.'

'Then we do this now,' the blacksmith said gruffly.

'We do it now,' the others agreed.

Strangers did have their uses after all, the innkeeper mused as the party crept out of the stable into the night.



FROM HIS HIDING place behind the sag-roofed barn, Roadwarden Hoffenbach looked down on the Slaughtered Calf from up amongst the scraggy trees through the sheeting rain. There appeared to be four of them shuffling self-consciously between the half-closed gates of the inn's stabling yard. Waiting on the dirt road outside was a heavy-built saddled shire horse, huffing and snorting irritably in the rain. The men were carrying what, at first, appeared to be an awkwardly packed sack. The only light illuminating their venture came from the moon. An arm flopped loosely from amidst the folds of rough cloth, as one of the men shifted his hold on the bundle, and Hoffenbach realised that what they were in fact carrying was a body. Unless he was

very much mistaken, it was the bearded, staff-bearing stranger who had been in the bar earlier that same evening.

Hoffenbach watched and waited, the rain pattering on the brim of his lobster-tail helm.

One of the party, whom the roadwarden was almost certain was the village blacksmith, took hold of the shire horse's reins and put a calming hand on the beast's muzzle, as the other conspirators manhandled their captive onto his back. Was the man dead or merely unconscious? Hoffenbach had no way of knowing. What did intrigue him was that the conspirators were securing the stranger's gnarled staff to the horse's saddle along with a scabbarded sword, which the roadwarden supposed must also belong to the comatose man.

If he acted now he could stop them, he considered, but if he did so he knew that he wouldn't get to the bottom of what was going on here, and might also pass up an opportunity to discover what had happened to the witch hunter Scheitz. Hoffenbach knew the slovenly innkeeper had been lying when he said that he hadn't seen the witch hunter, but just how much did he know? From his involvement in tonight's proceedings, the roadwarden guessed it was a great deal.

No, Hoffenbach decided, feeling the reassuring weight of his warhammer as he hefted it in his hands, he would hold back and see where the Viehdorfers were taking the red-robed stranger. He had seen his type before too, working as part of an Imperial commission, as he was. Practitioners of the Arts Magicae. Spellcasters. Wizards.



AS THE MEN led the horse and its burden away from the Slaughtered Calf and off the road along the winding paths of the forest, the roadwarden followed, keeping his distance, unseen. Once the party entered the forest, with the eerily glowing disc of the moon

broken by the rain-lashed canopy above them, moved away from the ambient light of the inn, they opened the shutters of the lantern they were carrying and the way through the woods was illuminated by a circle of yellow light.

The ground rose as they travelled south, putting several miles between themselves and the inn. The going was slow as the blacksmith carefully guided his horse over jutting stones and swollen root boles that infringed on the narrow path that they were following. The men were taking care not to slip in the quagmire that the gradually easing rain had made of the ground.

The further they travelled into the tangled forest the quieter the dark woods became, the tree trunks more twisted, the undergrowth more thorny and wild, the path less well defined. Hoffenbach felt uneasy. To him, this was the kind of place that the foul-brood beastmen would call home.

Then, at the top of a craggy hill, they broke through into a clearing. Hoffenbach ducked down behind the stump of a lightning-felled beech, and from his hiding place saw before him something that made the rest of the forest seem like a pleasant arboreal idyll.

The tree was huge, surely larger than any other tree he had seen in the forest; its thick trunk twisting upward and splitting into a mass of warped and misshapen, leafless branches. The top of the tree seemed to point an accusing finger at the cloud-shrouded night's sky, as if in defiance of the gods themselves. Hoffenbach was not able to discern what species the tree must once have been. Its sheer size suggested an oak to him, but the nature of its rough bark, grey and granite-like in the light of the moon that was cast down into the glade between the towering trees, seemed more like that of an ash. Its warped nature was unlike any creation of nature Hoffenbach knew. Perhaps this tree was no creation of nature.

It was not just the writhing form of the tree that lent this place such an all-pervading horror. It was also the bodies, in various states of decay, hanging from its branches. Some were barely more than lichen-flecked skeletons, loosely held

together by fibrous ligaments; others mere bones, dangling from moss eaten lengths of hempen rope. Others amongst the tree's grisly trophies were fresher corpses, still clad in the clothes or armour they had worn in life, their flesh grey and greening, heads lolling, eyes plucked clean from their sockets, mouths fixed in rictus grins of death.

There were the bodies of all manner of people hanging here, the cadavers swaying in the wind that wound down through the glade to caress the hanging tree. There were still more rotten strands of rope left trailing forlornly from the higher branches, their bodies having fallen, now lying amongst the mouldering leaf litter that covered the putrid soil of this place. Hoffenbach could see a ribcage here, a shattered skull there.

It was then that he saw, half-buried in the mud and mulch, the red-patina links of the great chains. Each one was secured to the macabre trunk at one end – looped around its great girth or hooked over iron pegs that had been hammered deep into the wood – and at the other to one of a number of boulders that were half-sunken in the earth around the perimeter of the glade. Hoffenbach couldn't begin to imagine why.

A gust of wind carried the vile scents of decomposition to him. He could taste it now on his tongue and he felt the hairs on the back of his neck rise as his unease increased. The rain that had become a gentle patter on the leaves above his head finally ceased. The hanging tree didn't so much seem to grow as to thrust its way out of the putrid earth. The air of the clearing was heavy with the smell of leaf-mould, wet clay and putrefaction – the smell of corruption.

It was only then that he realised that one of the hanging corpses was that of his erstwhile partner, Schweitz.

The witch hunter's body swung slowly like a macabre pendulum, his head tilted to one side at an unnatural angle, his cape torn into tatters, his eye sockets black, bloody holes. Hoffenbach could see that the tips of several branches were buried inside the witch hunter's dead body, as if they had been forced into the corpse for some reason. It almost looked, in fact, as if they

had grown that way. What ghoulish practices were taking place here? Perhaps the villagers didn't just hang their victims.

The only half-sane conclusion Hoffenbach could draw, from what he saw here, was that the villagers offered the tree sacrifice in the perversely misguided belief that it somehow protected Viehdorf with its malign influence – the rotting flesh of the corpses feeding the tree's hungry roots. Indeed, on his travels throughout the Emperor's realm, he had heard half-told tales of such barbaric practices before.

Still hidden behind the broken stump, Hoffenbach continued to watch, but still he did not rush to act. If there was anything that his career as a roadwarden on the highways of His Imperial Majesty had taught him, it was patience. He would watch and wait for his moment.

The bushy bearded forester, his axe tucked into his belt at his side, took a noosed rope from a saddlebag and threw half of its coiled length over one of the lower branches of the ghoulish tree.

Hoffenbach continued to watch as the noose was pushed roughly over the unconscious prisoner's head.

Abruptly the man began to stir, shaking his head to clear it of sleep and clutching clumsily at the blacksmith who was trying to pull the noose tight around his neck. Then, when he began to understand the mortal danger he was in, the man started to struggle more violently, arching his back; punching and kicking at his captors to free himself from their grasp.

Now was Hoffenbach's moment. Raising his hammer above his head, he charged into the clearing, leaf mould squelching and brittle bones cracking beneath his pounding footfalls.



G ERHART'S EYES BULGED open as he felt a rope tighten around his neck. Reacting on instinct, he kicked out as he tried to free himself from the rough hands he could feel holding him

down. He heard a man grunt in pain, felt the hands let go and then had the wind half-knocked out of him as he fell onto the wet ground, landing with a jarring smack on his right shoulder. As consciousness returned to him he became half-aware of men shouting, one as if charging into battle, others in an angry and confused clamour. The wizard managed to get both hands on the knot around his neck and strained at it to loosen the noose and free himself.

Coughing and gasping for breath, he rose onto his knees and pulled the noose free. Well, that was a first. People had tried to drown him, fry him to a crisp and shoot him, but no one had ever tried to hang him before.

A combination of wan moonlight and the orange, flickering glow of a lantern on the ground nearby showed him that he was in a forest clearing. The shadow of a huge, twisting tree loomed over him, even darker shapes hanging from its branches. He heard an angry whinny and realised that, as well as men, there was a horse here. He could smell its animal-sweat stink. There was a man lying on his back in the mud and leaves not three feet away. That must have been the man he had kicked.

How dare they? His temper blazed that these impudent peasants would try to do away with him, a battle wizard of the noble Bright Order of the Colleges of Magic!

The fire wizard scrambled to his feet. Leaves and thorny twigs clung to the hem of his muddied robes. The other man was also back-up on his feet and Gerhart saw that it was the man from the inn whom he had taken to be the village blacksmith. The blacksmith was slipping on the wet ground lunging for something the large shire horse was carrying. With a ringing of steel the blacksmith drew what Gerhart realised was his own sword from the scabbard that had been tied to the horse's saddlebag, along with his staff.

With an angry shout, the blacksmith threw himself at the wizard. Gerhart barely managed to twist out of the way of the enraged man's charge. The tip of his sword landed with a wet thunk where, only a moment before, Gerhart's leg had been, slicing into the knotty tissue of an exposed root. Out of the corner of his eye, Gerhart thought that he saw the root retracted at the blow, as a wounded animal might

withdraw its paw from a closing trap.

The blacksmith might be skilled with his hammer and anvil but he was no swordsman. Evading another uncoordinated swing, Gerhart stumbled over to the horse and tugged his staff free of the saddlebag. The blacksmith's next lunge was parried by the gnarled wood.

The wizard saw that the roadwarden was already trading blows with the forester, warhammer against axe, whilst the fat, nervous innkeeper was holding back from the fight.

Then there was the last of the men in the lynch mob – the gaunt, sorrowful individual Gerhart had seen drinking by himself – running at him, nock-bladed dagger drawn, wailing like a rabid animal, as if all human reason had left him.

The fire mage swung at the desperate man with his staff but his movements were still clumsy and uncoordinated, even though adrenaline was now rushing through his veins, purging drugged sleep from his body. He clipped the man's arm with the charcoaled end of his staff, but not hard enough to disarm him. The return blow with the other end, however, cracked the sad-eyed man across the chin and he dropped to his knees, blood pouring from his mouth.

Gerhart reeled, his head spinning, as the blacksmith came at him again, his teeth bared in an expression of angry defiance. Gerhart staggered backwards and collided with the snorting shire horse, which whinnied again and broke away, cantering towards the edge of the clearing.

The wizard's sword, still in the blacksmith's hands, connected with his staff, the blow sending jarring pain up Gerhart's arms through his wrists. If the staff had not been toughened by years of fire-tempering and absorption of raw magical energy, the blow would probably have splintered it.

Gerhart knew it was unlikely he would be able to hold off the brute strength of the blacksmith, even if he was an unskilled swordsman. He would need to draw on the other resources he had at his disposal to bring about an end to this battle.

He quickly tried to put some distance between himself and the blacksmith as possible and then closed his eyes on the chaos surrounding him. A spark flared in the darkness of his mind. Gerhart opened his eyes again but looked now with his eldritch mage-sight.

The winds of magic whirled and twisted through the clearing, visible to Gerhart as tormented currents and spinning eddies, bright coruscating ribbons of power. Black shadow-trails were drawn to the tree. Emerald tongues of flame slithered across the forest floor. Slanting, aquamarine bars of sorcerous radiance danced in the sky above the forest, like the fabled Northland aurora. Then he saw what he had been seeking. Hovering in the air over a forgotten lantern, left on the ground by one of the lynch mob, a nimbus of red and orange light, flickering like a candle-flame.

He drew the burnished glow to him, inhaling deeply as he did so, letting the esoteric energies into every fibre of his being, feeling them warming him to the core, as if they were healing his injuries, replenishing his strength. Years of experience fighting upon battlefields across the length and breadth of the Empire helped him focus now. Inside his mind a flame burned, bright and intense, growing in strength as Gerhart's anger fed its ferocity, and a spell took shape there.

At the edge of his field of vision, Gerhart saw the axe wielding forester fall as the roadwarden parried the slicing arc described by the axe blade and brought his own weapon around to connect with the side of his opponent's head with skull-cracking force.

Then the spell was ready and the wizard could contain its power no longer.

In an instant the lurching blacksmith was alight, his whole body, clothes and hair ablaze as if the source of the fire came from inside him. The man faltered in his run, but then stumbled onward, the fire consuming him, dropping Gerhart's sword. A piercing scream rose from the flailing human torch.

Gerhart was aware of other cries of panic.

Seeing what the wizard had done to the boldest of their companions, through the crackling flames curling from the burning blacksmith, Gerhart saw the innkeeper now

mounted on the shire horse, having somehow managed to haul his bulk onto its back, kicking his heels into its ribs as the mournful man, struggled to climb on behind him. He could hear a pathetic whimpering accompanying their flight. With a whinny, the horse galloped off into the forest, its hoofs beating a tattoo – like distant thunder on the ground that was swallowed up by the trees.

The blacksmith took two more clumsy steps and then collapsed, his cries silenced. The only sound now was the wailing whine, fizz and pop of the intense fire consuming his body.

Gerhart felt drained. Exhausted, the fire mage slumped to his knees on the leaf-churned ground. He slowly became aware of the roadwarden's cautious approach and looked up through weary eyes at the man standing over him, hammer still in hand. The black silhouette of the hanging tree rose up behind Hoffenbach, a sinister, warped perversion of nature, its branches – almost more like rough-skinned tentacles than tree limbs – clawed at the stratus-crossed sky. Blood ran from underneath the iron brim of the roadwarden's helmet.

If it hadn't been for the roadwarden's intervention it was quite likely that Gerhart's body would have joined those other crow-picked carcasses hanging like vile death-trophies from the possessive clutches of the tree. Now the warden was looking at the wizard in shocked surprise – perhaps even horror having witnessed the spontaneous combustion of the blacksmith. He had risked his own life to save Gerhart from being sacrificed to the tree. Hoffenbach's expression mirrored how his feelings were vying with each other, as he tried to reconcile saving the sorcerer's life with the devastating powers he had seen unleashed. Was it wise to let such a dangerous wizard live?

Gerhart Brennend had seen that expression before. The roadwarden was just as suspicious of wizards as the next superstitious peasant.

Black tentacle-shadows writhed with unnatural life in the darkness. Hoffenbach opened his mouth to speak but the only sound that came from his throat was a gargling death rattle. There was a wet

ripping sound and Gerhart felt a warm, cloying wetness splash his face. His nostrils were suddenly heavy with the hot smell of iron. Blood. It was only then that the wizard saw the broken end of a tree-limb protruding from the man's neck above the top of his hauberk.

Gerhart watched in horror, transfixed, as other branches seized the roadwarden's arms, body and legs, wrapping themselves fluidly, disgustingly around the man with a creaking like a yew bow being pulled taut. Cold realisation leeching the resolve from him to replace it with a numbing chill as he barely dared to believe what he was witnessing. Denied its sacrifice, the hanging tree itself had come to chaotic life. The tree effortlessly lifted the choking roadwarden into the air and then, in one violent eruption tore the wretched man limb from limb. Pieces of Hoffenbach dropped to the ground, offal left dangling from the writhing branches. Then the tree reached for the wizard.

Gerhart recovered himself immediately, the dire urgency of his predicament filling him with renewed resolve. His sword lay close to the still smouldering body of his foolish attacker. Reacting almost instinctively, Gerhart rolled away from the clutching grasp of the branches, stretched out his right arm and snatched up his soot-smeared blade. The pommel was still warm to the touch.

The tree lashed out at Gerhart again, only this time he was able to fend off its attack, blocking strikes from its lower branches with his sword. Where his blade struck the tree, thick dark sap oozed from its wounds like blood.

The branches recoiled from the wizard's wounding blows, giving Gerhart the opportunity to get to his feet once more. He backed away out of its reach. It seemed to the mage that the creaking and groaning of the wood, as it contorted itself into all manner of writhing shapes, was the tree growling at him.

The hanging tree was not done with him yet. With a clanking of protesting rusted metal links, the tree uprooted itself, pulled great splayed roots, dripping earth, from the grave-soil ground of the clearing and began to drag its massive bulk towards him. The boulders secured to the taut chains also came free of the

orange flecked mud as the tree heaved the great rocks attached to it across the clearing, gouging great ruts in the putrid loam.

Gerhart had faced all manner of horrors before – slithering Chaos-created spawn-things, a living daemon-cannon, creatures born of nightmares that by rights should never have existed in the waking world – but nothing so primal, so ancient and so terrifying as this hanging tree before. He could feel the malign influence of the Chaos energies fuelling the tree's unnatural vigour all around him. He could feel it thickening the air, feel it raising the hackles on the back of his neck, chilling his spine, freezing the marrow in his bones, taste its bitter gall in his mouth. He even felt its cold, corrupting touch in the dark depths of his very soul.

It was more than that; there was a malign sentience there too, gnawing at the edges of his own consciousness. Gerhart's preternatural senses revealed flashes of visions that were something like memories to him...

He saw blood-daubed, tattooed tribesmen offering the tree sacrifice in the form of enemies bested in battle... He sensed the powers of dark magic being drawn to the tree over the centuries as a result of the blood rites practised before it, and the sacrifices continuing, even as the tribe's settlement become the village of Viehdorf... He shared in the memory when the tree, so imbued was it with warping power, gained some kind of self-awareness... Its influence spreading through the soil beneath the forest, just like its roots, to encompass the village, corrupting the minds of the people who dwelt there so that they continued to feed it human souls, helping to strengthen the tree all the time. In turn its malignancy kept all other threats to its dominance at bay, in an unbroken cycle of corruption, sacrifice and soul-feasting...

Gerhart had overheard the exchange that took place between the greasy innkeeper and the roadwarden back at the inn. Now he understood why the rising storm of Chaos had left this place untouched. Chaos was already here.

His mind awash with disturbing images, in the dark Gerhart did not see the root push itself up out of the ground and snag itself around his ankle. Then he was falling, unable to stop himself. Gerhart plunged down the slope that dropped away at the edge of the clearing, tumbling head over heels through thorny thickets; roots and stones bruised his body, brambles snagging his beard.

He slid to a halt in a bed of nettles, cracking his head against a weatherworn stone. The jolt stunned him for a moment but also helped him shake himself free of the tree's malevolent influence. The hanging tree was crashing towards him, splintering saplings under its weight. Bodies swung wildly from its upper branches, or were torn from it as they snagged in the crooks of elm and silver birch.

It was almost on top of him now. A slimy jawbone fell from the skeletal canopy of the tree into Gerhart's lap as the chaos tree's violent lurching shook it loose from a cadaver swinging high above.

There was no way that he could prevail here armed only with his sword, Gerhart realised. There was only one thing that could save him now. Gerhart looked with his mage-sight again and a glimmer of hope entered his heart. The hollow where he lay was saturated with swirling magical energy. There were places in the world that attracted the winds of magic more strongly than others, like iron filings were attracted to a lodestone.

The fire wizard looked down at the stone he had hit with his head. The tracery of ancient carvings could still just be made out beneath the lichen crawling over its surface, possibly made by the tribesmen who had first offered the tree fealty in times long past. The concentration of magical power was greatest here; drawn to this spot by the ancient stone. Had the primitives who put the stone here realised what effect its positioning would have, Gerhart wondered? It was a potential stockpile of power just waiting to be tapped.

The tree reached for Gerhart for the last time, for now there was no escape for the wizard. As it did so, he breathed out slowly and, ignoring the pain in the back of his skull, focused his mind once more.

So saturated in eldritch force was this spot that the very essence of the winds of magic simply poured into the attuned wizard, the tongue of flame burning inside his mind exploding into a devastating firestorm. Gerhart flung his arms out towards the tree, his hands seeming to burst into flame as he did so. Sorcerous power roared from his fingertips, becoming a roiling ball of liquid fire as it raced towards the hanging tree. Yellow fires blazed within his eyes as Gerhart cast his spell, immolating the tree with his fiery magic. He had not felt power like this since Wolfenburg.

Flames washed over the tree, taking hold immediately all over its grotesquely bulging trunk, fat with the countless souls it had consumed. The tree let out a cacophonous scream, like the splintering of wood, as if myriad voices were screaming in unison with the angry roaring of the flames. The tree writhed in tortured agony as it burned, the rotting corpses hanging from its contorted bow catching light as well. Skeletal forms crashed to the forest floor in a flurry of sparks as their ropes burnt through, the raging inferno lighting up the top of the hill and the forest around it.

His spell cast, his power spent, Gerhart staggered clear of the dying tree. Out of range of its flailing, fiery death-throes, the wizard watched with grim satisfaction as the tree burned. As it burned, he fancied that he could see faces contorted in agony distorting the bark-skin of the tree, adding their howling voices to the tree's death-screams.

Satisfied that his work here was done, his staff and sword recovered, Gerhart left the clearing on the same path the horse had taken with its two riders. The wizard followed its hoof prints back towards the Slaughtered Calf and the corrupted village.

The tree itself had shown the wizard that the people of Viehdorf were party to its evil. The land would not be free of the contagion that was the Chaos growth's malignant influence until the corruption that had been allowed to fester there, thanks to this root of evil, had been exorcised and the wound cauterised.

Before dawn Viehdorf would burn. 

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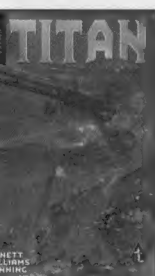
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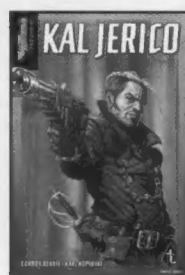
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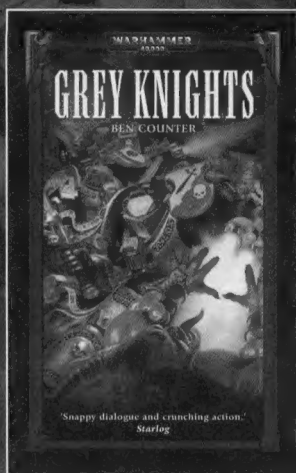
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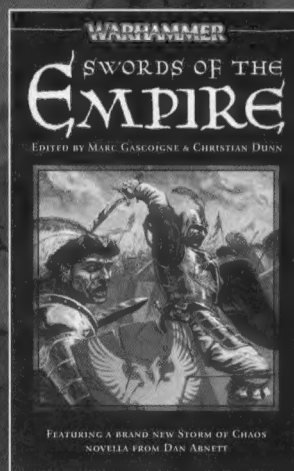
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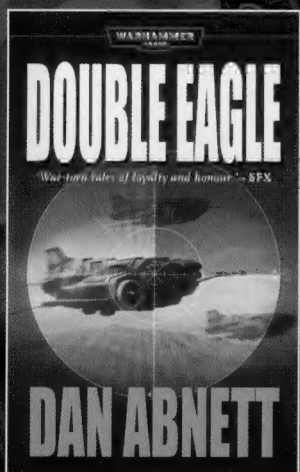
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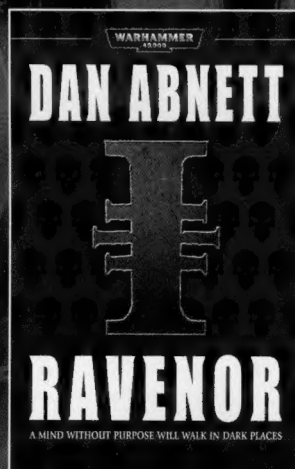
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